

# What Soviet Periodicals Can Tell Us About the Propaganda on the Women's Service in the USSR's Armed Forces (1941-1945)

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## *Abstract*

The materials of Soviet newspapers are an important source for studying the policy of the regime regarding the service of women in the armed forces of the USSR. Based on the frequency of publication of these materials, the date of their publication, and the content, it is possible to make assumptions about the need for female personnel in the armed forces during a particular period of war, as well as to highlight and evaluate the government's propaganda concerning female soldiers in general. However, the thematic articles contained almost no specifics about the service of women in the armed forces of the USSR as a mass phenomenon – they did not provide data on the establishment of women's military units, general statistics on the presence of women in the Army, conscription data, etc. The totalitarian regime kept this information secret, unlike other members of the anti-Hitler coalition.

**Keywords:** periodicals, USSR, women, armed forces, Soviet-German war.

## **Introduction**

During the war years, the newspapers of the USSR continued to be under the full control of the Soviet government, which established control over them as early as the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, wartime is generally characterised by increased censorship and propaganda, even in democratic countries. Such changes are due to military needs. They are aimed at mobilising the resources available in the country, at keeping secret the information that could potentially harm the state's troops, etc.<sup>2</sup> However, turning to the problem of coverage of women's military service during the Second World War in various countries, one can see that some of them discussed this topic in detail, providing a large amount of data on the specifics of women's recruitment into the Army, their training and service at different stages of the war. For example, such information can be found in the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses. Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 246, 248.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Simon Eliot and Marc Wiggam, *Allied Communication to the Public During the Second World War: National and Transnational Networks* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 3; Phillip Knightley, "World War II: Britain, United States, Soviet Union, Germany," in *Censorship: a World Encyclopedia*, ed. Derek Jones (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 265.

periodicals of Great Britain and the US.<sup>3</sup> Officially, women in these countries did not perform combat roles but held non-combat military positions. Conversely, the Soviet government did not limit the role of female military personnel to non-combat, and its public discourse in the interwar period rather encouraged women to master a wide range of different professions. At the end of the 1930s, there were widespread statements that gender equality had been fully achieved in the USSR, even in the military sphere, and women were ready to take up arms on an equal footing with men to defend the homeland if necessary<sup>4</sup>. However, the question is: can Soviet periodicals be used to deepen our knowledge about the military service of Soviet women during the Second World War, and if yes, to what extent?

The war experience of Soviet female soldiers has frequently been the subject of historical research. V. Murmantseva,<sup>5</sup> V. Petrakova,<sup>6</sup> G. Kameneva,<sup>7</sup> O. Mamrotska,<sup>8</sup> A. Krylova,<sup>9</sup> R. Markwick and E. Cardona,<sup>10</sup> among others, have considered certain aspects of this issue.

At the same time, there is only isolated research on the coverage in the newspapers of the military service of Soviet women, research that is often not based on diverse source materials. For example, in the article by A. Arinov,<sup>11</sup> the author aimed to investigate the peculiarities of the coverage of women's military

<sup>3</sup> For example, see: "100,000 women wanted," *Lincolnshire Standard and Boston Guardian*, September 06, 1941, 8; "Women's call-up rules tightened," *Leven Mail*, September 03, 1941, 3; "WAAC quota is increased," *The Tacoma times*, December 11, 1942, 20; "2,634 men from McDowell County are now on the firing lines! But only 13 Women from McDowell County have taken their places in the ranks! How about it, girls?," *Marion progress*, February 01, 1945, 7.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see: Iosif Stalin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. T. 18 (Tver': Informacionno-izdatel'skij tsentr "Sojuz", 2006); *Vneocherednaja chetvertaja sessija Verhovnogo Soveta SSSR [1-go sozyva]*, (28 avgusta-1 sentjabrja 1939 g.): *stenograficheskij otchet* (Moskva: OGIZ, 1939), 41-42, 46-48, 75.

<sup>5</sup> Valentina Murmantseva, *Sovetskie zhenshchiny v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Mysl', 1974).

<sup>6</sup> Viktoriia Petrakova, "Podgotovka zhenshchin-snaiperov v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny," *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta* 8, no. 3 (2013): 92-109

<sup>7</sup> Galina Kameneva, "Opyt sluzhby zhenshchin v riadah VoЕННО-Morskogo flota (1941-1945 gg.): na materialah Iuga Rossii," *Gumanitarnye i iuridicheskie issledovaniia*, 4 (2015): 72-78.

<sup>8</sup> Oksana Mamrots'ka, "Interpretatsiia uchasti zhinok Ukrainy u viis'kovykh diiakh na frontakh Druhoi svitovoi viiny," *Hileia* 1, no. 143 (2019): 88-92.

<sup>9</sup> Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat. A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Roger Markwick and Euridice Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Alemzhan Arinov, "Uchastie zhenshchin v boevykh deistviiakh na frontakh Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny v sovetskoi voennoi periodicheskoi pechati," *Zhenshchina v rossiiskom obshchestve* 4 (2021): 136-148.



service in Soviet periodicals. However, the source base for covering this broad topic is insufficient. The vast majority of newspaper materials used by the author were published in March 1945, when the end of the war was already predictable. Thus, it is impossible to investigate changes in the rhetoric regarding female military personnel during the war based on these sources. In addition, the materials selected by the author were published on the eve of International Women's Day (March 8). Since 1921, March 8 has been a public holiday in the USSR (since 1965, it was declared a day off). However, the Soviet authorities significantly distorted its meaning. In the context of this research, this holiday served as an occasion for the authorities to emphasize the presence of women in the ranks of the Army and create the appearance of gender equality in the country. Since 1942, a few days before and after March 8, there had been a sharp increase in the amount of materials about servicewomen. However, this occurred against the backdrop of a highly controversial discourse on the role of women in war on other days of the calendar. Therefore, based on Arinov's selected sources, and considering their publication date, it is impossible either to trace the frequency of mention of female military personnel in periodicals during the war or to understand the peculiarities of covering the issue of female personnel service during this period.

In addition, the author's conclusions are questionable. A. Arinov asserts that "... in the military periodicals, the issue of women's participation in the war was discussed from two opposite points of view (female and male). Female authors celebrated women's equality with men at the front and created and maintained the image of a valiant female soldier. Male authors honoured women with only a supporting role in the war, singling them out in the context of helping servicemen in various combat and non-combat conditions."<sup>12</sup> However, according to my observations, both male and female authors in the military and rear periodicals presented the women's role in the Army as auxiliary during the war. Sometimes female authors did not mention the presence of women at the front as soldiers, or they emphasised the purely 'feminine' qualities of female soldiers, such as caring, creating comfort, etc.<sup>13</sup> It is also worth noting that many newspaper articles devoted to Soviet female soldiers were published without indicating the author, making it impossible to determine their gender.

The rest of the studies which paid attention to the coverage of women's military service in the Soviet periodicals during the Second World War were not aimed at a

<sup>12</sup> Arinov, "Uchastie zhenshchin...", 145.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see: N. Ignatova, "Geroini," *Stalinskii sokol*, March 7, 1945, 3; Klavdija Kirsanova, "Sovetskie patriotki," *Stalinskii sokol*, March 7, 1945, 3; Ljudmila Pavlichenko, "Geroini fronta i tyła," *Krasnyi flot*, March 8, 1944, 3; Klavdija Nikolaeva, "Sovetskaia zhenshchina na boevom postu," *Pravda*, August 2, 1941, 3; "Vsesoiuznyi miting zhenshchin-materei i zhen frontovikov," *Pravda*, April 14, 1943, 3.

deep study of this problem. For example, S. G. Jug analysed the leading Red Army newspaper *Krasnaia Zvezda* while investigating the construction of masculinity of the male Soviet soldiers. In his work, considerable attention is paid to female soldiers' image. However, the author's choice of only one military newspaper as a source base does not make it possible to extend his general conclusions to the entire Soviet society and concerns only the military environment. S. G. Jug states, "...that divergent official and soldierly masculinities retained a common set of values that emphasised women's non-military nature and non-combatant roles as a way to preserve the gendered motivations established at the outset of the war."<sup>14</sup> He agrees that Soviet propaganda tended to omit the women's presence in the military. Still, he did not give a detailed analysis of how this was accomplished through propaganda, which focused on masculine values to diminish women's participation.

Clearly, given the sustained interest of researchers in studying the problem of women's military service in the USSR during the Soviet-German war, a detailed and thorough analysis of this type of source and evaluation of its potential for the study of the issue is of particular interest.

We should understand the true nature of the Soviet need for women's participation in the Red Army from 1941-1945. This study aims to contribute to illuminating these aspects of history. In doing so, this paper analyses the content of the Soviet newspapers during the Soviet-German war to uncover their significance for studying the service of Soviet women in the armed forces.

### Sources and methodology

The source base for this study was provided by Soviet rear and military newspapers. In particular, these concern the digital collections of central Soviet newspapers *Pravda* (almost all issues from 1941-1944),<sup>15</sup> *Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiashchikhsia SSSR* (the vast majority of issues from 1942-1945),<sup>16</sup> *Komsomol'skaia pravda* (most of the issues from 1942-1945),<sup>17</sup> the Moscow city newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva* (almost all issues from 1941-1945),<sup>18</sup> the main

<sup>14</sup> Steven George Jug, "All Stalin's Men? Soldierly Masculinities in the Soviet War Effort, 1938-1945" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013), II.

<sup>15</sup> "Newspaper 'Pravda,'" *Electronekrasovka*, accessed September 03, 2022, <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/editions/24>.

<sup>16</sup> "Newspaper 'Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiashchikhsia SSSR,'" *Electronekrasovka*, accessed September 03, 2022, <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/editions/3>.

<sup>17</sup> "Newspaper 'Komsomol'skaia pravda,'" *Electronekrasovka*, accessed September 03, 2022, <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/editions/6>.

<sup>18</sup> "Newspaper 'Vecherniaia Moskva,'" *Electronekrasovka*, accessed September 03, 2022, <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/editions/1>.



Red Army newspaper *Krasnaia zvezda* (most issues from 1943-1944),<sup>19</sup> the newspaper of the USSR Navy *Krasnyi flot* (the vast majority of issues from 1941-1945),<sup>20</sup> the newspaper of the Moscow military district *Krasnyi voin* (issues from 1944-1945),<sup>21</sup> and the newspaper of the Air Force of the Red Army *Stalinskii sokol* (the vast majority of issues from 1943, January-May 1945).<sup>22</sup> Studying these newspapers makes it possible to trace the peculiarities of the coverage of women's military service in Soviet propaganda that targeted both the civilian population and military personnel during the war. I performed an end-to-end search of the newspaper collections mentioned above using the keywords 'zhenshchina'/'zhenshchiny' ('woman'/'women'), 'devushka'/'devushki' ('girl'/'girls'), to establish the frequency of these words during the war years, as well as the context of their use.

For research purposes, I used a selection of 150 issues of wartime newspapers, namely:

1) **1941**: 20 issues of *Vecherniaia Moskva* (No. 153, 159, 162, 164, 165, 172, 174, 179, 180, 188, 196, 197, 203, 212, 214, 226, 231, 246, 268, 286); 20 issues of 'Pravda' (No. 180, 184, 186, 187, 197, 198, 199, 212, 214, 219, 230, 249, 250, 256, 271, 278, 279, 284, 296, 336); three issues of *Krasnyi flot* (No. 183, 217, 225);

2) **1942**: 11 issues of *Vecherniaia Moskva* (No. 27, 64, 108, 182, 209, 253, 254, 282, 287, 298, 305); six issues of *Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiashchikhsia SSSR* (No. 41, 81, 92, 106, 120, 205); eight issues of *Komsomol'skaia pravda* (No. 21, 31, 56, 70, 221, 224, 232, 249); seven issues of *Krasnyi flot* (No. 58, 109, 131, 169, 200, 277, 300); 11 issues of *Pravda* (No. 18, 26, 48, 79, 82, 131, 188, 249, 264, 345, 346).

3) **1943**: 15 issues of *Vecherniaia Moskva* (No. 10, 54, 55, 57, 87, 95, 124, 151, 156, 194, 211, 249, 255, 276, 295); three issues of *Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiashchikhsia SSSR* (No. 7, 10, 202); four issues of *Komsomol'skaia pravda* (No. 7, 189, 194, 257); three issues of *Krasnaia zvezda* (No. 55, 63, 230); seven issues of *Krasnyi flot* (No. 5, 53, 60, 67, 73, 218, 269); four issues of *Pravda* (No. 9, 97, 103, 286); one issue of *Stalinskii sokol* (No. 9).

4) **1944**: four issues of *Vecherniaia Moskva* (No. 43, 100, 259, 263); five issues of *Komsomol'skaia pravda* (No. 55, 105, 121, 148, 267); two issues of *Krasnyi flot* (No. 57, 58); three issues of *Pravda* (No. 1, 45, 52).

<sup>19</sup> "Newspaper 'Krasnaia zvezda,'" *Electronekrasovka*, accessed September 03, 2022, <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/editions/8>.

<sup>20</sup> "Newspaper 'Krasnyi flot,'" *Electronekrasovka*, accessed September 03, 2022, <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/editions/9>.

<sup>21</sup> "Newspaper 'Krasnyi voin,'" *Electronekrasovka*, accessed September 03, 2022, <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/editions/7>.

<sup>22</sup> "Newspaper 'Stalinskii sokol,'" *Electronekrasovka*, accessed September 03, 2022, <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/editions/38>.

5) **1945**: four issues of *Vecherniaia Moskva* (No. 43, 51, 100, 112); two issues of *Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiashchikhsia SSSR* (No. 229, 235); four issues of *Komsomol'skaia pravda* (No. 30, 51, 56, 60); three issues of *Krasnyi vojn* (No. 52, 97, 154); one issue of *Krasnyi flot* (No. 100); 2 issues of *Stalinskii sokol* (No. 19, 20).

In this study, I used the methods of comparison and qualitative content analysis that allows 'to systematically describe the meaning of a material' from a specific angle.<sup>23</sup> For the processing of a wide range of Soviet periodicals, I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The CDA is "... a research enterprise which critically analyses the relation between language and society. More specifically, CDA is a type of discourse-analytical research that studies the way ideology, identity, and inequality are (re)enacted through texts produced in social and political contexts."<sup>24</sup> The language in this context is "crucial in constructing and sustaining ideologies, which, in turn, are seen as important in establishing and maintaining social identities and inequalities."<sup>25</sup>

### **The salient features of the discourse concerning servicewomen in the wartime Soviet periodicals**

N. Gallimulina states that the most common texts during the Soviet-German war were propaganda materials, 'in which women of various ages (mothers, beloved ones, daughters) embodied "vulnerability", "those who must be protected", that is, they acted as the embodiment of what is worth fighting and even dying for'.<sup>26</sup> I agree with this statement; however, in my opinion, this assessment should be clarified and expanded. While conducting this research, I used a collection of digitised Soviet newspapers from the digital portal 'Electronekrasovka'.<sup>27</sup> It allows searching in the texts of newspapers by keywords, so that one can find the necessary thematic material more quickly and obtain significant findings. In particular, I found that throughout the Soviet-German war (1941-1945), there was a tendency to use the terms "woman"/ "women" when covering the atrocities of the enemy in the Soviet lands, while the representatives of the so-called 'weaker sex' performed the roles of victims who were beaten, raped, tortured, shot, etc.

<sup>23</sup> Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Wodak, "Editor's Introduction: Critical Discourse Analysis" in *Critical discourse analysis. Volume I. Concepts, History, Theory*, ed. Ruth Wodak (Los Angeles and Washington DC: Sage, 2013), XIX-XX.

<sup>25</sup> Wodak, "Editor's Introduction," XIX-XX.

<sup>26</sup> Nadija Gallimulina, "Zhenskie obrazy v sovetskoj propagande perioda Velikoj Otechestvennoj vojny," *Vestnik Social'no-pedagogicheskogo instituta*, no. 1 (9) (2014), <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/zhenskie-obrazy-v-sovetskoy-propagande-perioda-velikoy-otechestvennoy-voyny>, accessed on May 31, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> "Portal Elektronekrasovka", <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/>, accessed February 04, 2022.



Such materials significantly outnumber the articles covering various activities of women during the war. Women were mentioned alongside the elderly and children as the most vulnerable and weak members of society: ‘angry executioners shot every fifth villager, including women and children’;<sup>28</sup> ‘inhuman abuse of women wherever the attacker set foot – in Germany after the Nazis came to power, in the Balkans, in Poland, in the villages of Soviet Ukraine and Belarus occupied by Hitler’s hordes – this is not rabid war madness, this is a conscious plan and program’;<sup>29</sup> ‘after the young women were taken to the hospital, they were raped there by drunken brutalised soldiers’;<sup>30</sup> the Nazis ‘scoff, torture, rape women, and then kill them. They kill young children in front of their parents,’ etc.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding numbers, materials on women’s labour exploits are second. The newspapers emphasised that women had to replace men who had left their positions in the rear to go to the front. Consequently, women appear in factory jobs, agriculture and other employment positions in the rear. They learned ‘male’ trades, and in such a way, they helped the front.<sup>32</sup> It is noteworthy that in almost all materials devoted to the participation of women in the war, this topic is the leading one, even when the material mentions female soldiers too. Exceptions are articles about women at the front (for example, those dedicated to L. Pavlichenko, N. Onilova, etc.). Soviet propaganda constructed images of war heroes, mainly through the mass media, often distorting reality and exaggerating their achievements. These persons were supposed to serve as examples of the ‘true’ patriotism of a Soviet citizen, and among them were not only heroes but also heroines.<sup>33</sup>

In third place are materials on nurses, health education supervisors in the Red Army, and female partisans.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, a relatively small number of general materials were devoted to the servicewomen in the Soviet armed forces in combat positions. Notably, even in the materials about female soldiers, authors sometimes reminded the

<sup>28</sup> “Ot sovetskogo Informbiuro,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, July 14, 1941, 2.

<sup>29</sup> “Prizyv sovetskikh patriotok,” *Pravda*, July 19, 1941, 1.

<sup>30</sup> “Zverstva gitlerovskikh dushegubov,” *Krasnyi flot*, August 6, 1941, 2.

<sup>31</sup> “Nemetsko-fashistskie zverstva vo L’vove,” *Pravda*, August 9, 1941, 2.

<sup>32</sup> For example, see: Klavdiia Nikolaeva, “Sovetskaia zhenshchina na boevom postu,” 3; “Geroicheskies zhenshchiny,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, October 27, 1942, 1.

<sup>33</sup> See Kateryna Kobchenko, “Soviet Heroines of the Second World War: Their Making and Remaking in Ukraine” in *The political cult of the dead in Ukraine: traditions and dimensions from the First World War to today*, ed. Guido Hausmann and Iryna Sklokina (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, ein Imprint der Brill-Gruppe, 2021), 111-135; Henry Sakaida and Christa Hook, *Heroines of the Soviet Union 1941–45* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> For example, see: “Patriotki,” *Pravda*, July 5, 1941, 1; “Za Lizu Chaikinu!,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, May 28, 1943, 1.

reader that women were closer in status to children than to men. For example, in the article 'Great People's Power', M. Tikhonov puts them in a row, writing that 'Mass heroism of Leningrad – the exploits of not only men but also women, adolescents and schoolchildren.'<sup>35</sup>

A similar, albeit not identical, picture is recorded based on the use of the word 'girls.' This keyword appeared in the materials about servicewomen relatively often. Still, in general, the number of such articles was low, compared to materials dedicated to the work of civilian girls on the 'labour front', while collecting parcels for soldiers, etc. B. M. Schechter explains that Soviet female soldiers were often referred to as 'girls' because this term '...implied sexual purity and the placing of duty above both personal happiness and the fulfilment of traditional roles of lover, wife and in particular, mother.'<sup>36</sup> At the same time, the term 'woman' '...in Russian was generally associated with the loss of virginity, pointed to a person who was sexually active and potentially pregnant.'<sup>37</sup> For two reasons, I can only partially agree with this statement. First, female soldiers were addressed both as 'women' and as 'girls', while the latter term was used more often. Second, the term 'girls' was more popular because the Komsomol, or the All-Union Leninist Communist Youth Union, played a very significant role during the war years in mobilising young men and women into the ranks of the Army.<sup>38</sup> 'Girls' ('devushki') were often mentioned in the periodicals together with 'young men' ('iunoshi'). According to the state propaganda, they both went to war to fight for their happy Soviet future.<sup>39</sup> Thus, in this case, the recruits' age, energy, and devotion to duty were paramount in the propaganda. The trope of 'moral purity' of female soldiers was significant during the war years. However, the attitude toward the sexual life of the servicewomen was generally more relaxed during the war than in its aftermath.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Nikolai Tikhonov, "Velikaia narodnaia sila," *Pravda*, November 20, 1943, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Brandon M. Schechter, "'Girls' and 'Women.' Love, Sex, Duty and Sexual Harassment in the Ranks of the Red Army 1941-1945," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 17 (2016): 3.

<sup>37</sup> Schechter, "'Girls' and 'Women,'" 3.

<sup>38</sup> Iuliia Ivanova, "Zhenshchiny v voynakh Otechestva," in *Voenno-Istoricheskaia Antropologiya*, ed. Elena Senavskaya (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2002), 351.

<sup>39</sup> For example, see: D. Zaslavskii, "Knut i priianik," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, October 2, 1942, 4; "Za schastlivuiu molodost'!", *Pravda*, September 6, 1942, 1; "Pis'mo komsomol'tsev i molodezhi Sovetskogo Soiuza tovarishchu I. V. Stalinu," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, October 28, 1943, p.1; "Molodezh' v trude i v boiu," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, September 5, 1942, 2.

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Iu. Trifonov, "Bondarenko (Kataeva) Mariia Dmitrievna," *Ia Pomniu*, 30.10.2013, <https://bit.ly/3vVMUdY>, accessed February 04, 2022; Oleg Budnitskii, "Muzhchiny i zhenshchiny v Krasnoi Armii (1941-1945)," *L'URSS et la Seconde Guerre mondiale* 52/2-3 (2011): 405-422.





Female military personnel experienced the greatest pressure from society relating to their sexuality in the post-war period.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, information about women in the military service could be found using gender-specific position titles – ‘zenitchitsy’ (female anti-aircraft gunners), ‘pulemetchitsy’ (female machine gunners), etc. However, most often, materials about military women could be found by searching for their surnames, because Soviet propaganda published information primarily about a narrow circle of female soldiers who, in some way, became famous in battle during the war. The latter practice was beneficial to the authorities. On the one hand, the coverage of the biographies of a small circle of heroic women contributed to the rise of patriotism among the population, particularly among men, having an effect similar to that of the female death battalions during the First World War. On the other hand, the emphasis on individual heroines, against the background of the lack of relevant information about the numbers of women in the armed forces, represented the phenomenon of the female soldier as an uncommon occurrence, which minimized the potential obstacles to a return to the traditional social order after the war was over.

#### **From omission to rare/ sporadic mentions:**

##### **Women soldiers in the Soviet newspapers of 1941-1943**

V. Amirov states that, at the beginning of the Soviet-German war, the number of materials devoted to women in the military was negligible, and I agree with this statement. At the same time, the author asserts that a large number of such publications appeared in 1943 due to the increase in the number of female soldiers, as a consequence of the great losses of the Soviet Army: ‘The image of a female soldier is constructed in the publications of Soviet newspapers of the war period simultaneously with the construction of the image of a home front worker, gradually moving to the fore and becoming mainstream.’<sup>42</sup> However, in support of this statement, Amirov gives only one quote about ‘thousands of Soviet women’ in the Army, from an article published in 1943, and refers to periodical materials that speak about specific women who embodied examples of heroism. These articles did not highlight the actual scale of women’s involvement in the military, and their number was not so great in the newspapers, contrary to the author’s contention. According to the results of my research, the reality was somewhat different, and the materials dedicated to female soldiers did not come to the fore within the newspaper materials dedicated to women throughout the war.

<sup>41</sup> Budnitskii, “Muzhchiny i zhenshchiny v Krasnoi Armii (1941-1945),” 420-421.

<sup>42</sup> Amirov Valerii Mikhailovich, “Unificirovannyi obraz sovetskoi zhenshhiny v sisteme markerov gazetnogo diskursa voennogo vremeni,” *Vestnik Volgogradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Serija 2: Jazykoznanie*, no.5 (2020), 150.

From the very beginning of the war, Soviet women joined the military service both voluntarily and due to mobilisation. Thus, according to the latest data, 490,235 Soviet women were mobilised into the armed forces during the war. There were 5,594 mobilised women in 1941, 235,025 in 1942; 194,695 in 1943; 51,306 in 1944; and 3,615 in 1945.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, the appearance of materials about them in the mass media since the beginning of the Soviet-German war was justified. In the first months after the start of the war, the news mostly concerned women who sought to go to the front as nurses and health education supervisors.<sup>44</sup> Most materials, which appeared in 1941, highlighted their work in the rear. Almost every article on the issue focused on women replacing men who went to the front.<sup>45</sup>

At first, the Soviet authorities insisted that there was no need for women to become Red Army soldiers, even though the government acknowledged that there was a large number of women who asked to be sent to the front: "The whole country knows that a Soviet woman will take a rifle and go to the front to beat the enemy. At the moment, in the Army, at the front, a woman is needed first of all as a nurse, health education supervisor, and doctor."<sup>46</sup> This article was published on August 4, 1941, a little more than two months before Stalin signed an order to create three women's air regiments. As we can see, the creation of these regiments was not publicized. In the first years of the war, the USSR tried to deny that it had created purely female military units. After all, this could be seen as evidence of too few male recruits, a fact which the regime did not want to admit. Information about such units periodically leaked to the press, and the USSR responded to it with outright lies. For example, in an article published on July 8, 1941, it is stated:

"Stefani agency reported that 'the USSR's government ordered to form women's regiments. Millions of women in the USSR are ready to fight against the fascist hordes with weapons in their hands. But we were not going and are not going to organise women's regiments. We have three times as many men as in Germany, and everyone knows what they are fighting for, while in Germany, nine-tenths of the population do not know why the war against the Soviet Union began.'<sup>47</sup>

Another message, published on August 1, 1941, stated that the reason for rejecting women's applications to be sent to the front as a soldier was that 'there is no need for women fighters' because the country's reserves are 'countless.'<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Velikaia Otechestvennaia bez grifa sekretnosti. Kniga poter'. Noveishee spravocnoe izdanie* (Moskva: Veche, 2010), 38.

<sup>44</sup> "Patriotki," *Pravda*, July 5, 1941, 1.

<sup>45</sup> For example, see: Klavdija Nikolaeva, "Sovetskaia zhenshchina na boevom postu," 3; "Iestonskie zhenshchiny pomogaiut kovat' pobedu nad vragom," *Pravda*, July 1, 1941, 1.

<sup>46</sup> "Boevye podrugii," *Pravda*, August 4, 1941, 1.

<sup>47</sup> "Na ocherednoi press-konferencii inostrannykh korrespondentov," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, July 08, 1941, 3.

<sup>48</sup> "Doch' partizana," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, August 01, 1941, 2.



However, it quickly became clear that Soviet male human resources were not 'countless.' The number of materials that mention women who fought with weapons in their hands increased after the beginning of the defence of Leningrad.<sup>49</sup> In these materials, one could often find calls to intensify work in the rear and join the ranks of health education supervisors and nurses, but also to replenish combat units: "All women must become active fighters against fascism. If we want to experience maternal happiness, if we want to raise a free generation, a generation of people with the right to life and happiness, if we do not want wars to devastate our lands and our homes, and our children not to be orphans and disadvantaged vagrants, if we want all this – our place is in the ranks. Fascism is our worst enemy, women!"<sup>50</sup> Another example: "... All the workers of Leningrad, not only men but also women, came to defend their hometown. Our brothers, our sisters! We will not let the enemy enter our beloved, wonderful city..."<sup>51</sup> Mentions of the large-scale participation of women in the war with weapons in their hands also became more frequent during the defence of Kyiv: "The girls of Kyiv, together with their parents and brothers, are selflessly fighting the enemy. Many female Komsomol members have already become famous on the battlefield: 18-year-old Tania Didenko, machine gunner Olga Iakimova, nurse Nezamykina, and partisan Katia Abramova. They are everywhere, these brave girls of our city. The inhabitants of Kyiv, both on the fronts and in the rear, show their courage and heroism."<sup>52</sup>

However, along with such rhetoric extolling brave girls, the discourse continued suggesting that women should help the soldiers rather than join the army directly. This view presupposed that combat at the front should essentially remain a male pursuit. For example, an article by researcher L. Stern stated: "We, women, must help our soldiers by all means available to us at the front and in the rear, replacing those who go to the front in factories, laboratories, schools and in the fields."<sup>53</sup>

No less popular during the first year of the Soviet-German war were various appeals to women of the USSR or worldwide.<sup>54</sup> In the appeal 'To women around the world!', published on September 8, 1941, emphasis was placed on the

<sup>49</sup> For example, see: "Otvazhnye zashchitnitsy goroda Lenina," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, September 10, 1941, 2.

<sup>50</sup> E. Ershova, "Zhenshchin y vsego mira – na bor'bu protiv fashizma," *Pravda*, September 9, 1941, 3.

<sup>51</sup> "Ne toptat' fashistskomu sapogu goroda Lenina!," *Krasnyi flot*, September 14, 1941, 1.

<sup>52</sup> "Radiopereklichka trekh gorodov," *Pravda*, September 15, 1941, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Lina Shtern, "Vse sily – na zashchitu chelovecheskoi kul'tury," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, September 24, 1941, 2.

<sup>54</sup> For example, see: "Net bol'shego vraga u zhenshchin, chem Gitler," *Pravda*, July 18, 1941, 2; "Prizyv sovetskikh patriotok," *Pravda*, July 19, 1941, 1.

auxiliary nature of women's participation in the war: Side by side with the Red Army, which bore the primary effort in the fight against Hitler's hordes, the Soviet woman proudly holds her position. The more furious the enemy becomes, the stronger her heart and her will to win. At the forefront, she assists the wounded. She extinguishes fires caused by Nazi pilots. She works at the factory and makes weapons and shells. She fights in guerrilla units with her husband and son."<sup>55</sup> As we can see, there is no mention in the text of women in combat positions in the regular Army.

In the article 'The Soviet Woman on a Combat Post', K. Nikolaeva tried to legitimize different types of women's participation in the war through historical references. Female service in the nursery units, on the front lines and in guerrilla units during the Civil War was mentioned: "Women of the Soviet land have always fought side by side with men, demonstrated their heroism, and inscribed many pages in the history of the struggle for the happiness of the homeland."<sup>56</sup> However, in the context of the Soviet-German war, the material addressed only issues relating to the fact that women sent their men and sons to the front, that they started to work in factories in their place, mastered the profession of health education supervisors and nurses, became donors, and prepared gifts and parcels for Red Army soldiers. There is no mention of women who also served in the war as soldiers.

In 1941, a famous Soviet historian, Professor M. Nechkina, in her review of the history of military conflicts, mentioned the female partisan and participant of the 1812 Patriotic War, V. Kozhina, who managed to capture several French soldiers.<sup>57</sup> A little later, more extensive reviews on military history appeared in the USSR, and they included more examples of female soldiers of previous centuries. Thus, the article by A. Novikov-Priboy, along with N. Durova, highlighted the examples of women associated with one of the historic places in Moscow – 'Babiy gorodok' (literally – 'Women's town') – that defended their settlement from the Mongol horde. The author described several examples of women's participation in battles during the Civil War and the current armed conflict. Novikov-Priboy argued that Russian women took part in the armed conflicts alongside men. He also tried to encourage more Soviet women to perform combat roles and show their heroism.<sup>58</sup>

The rhetoric that highlighted the participation and contribution of women in the war did not reflect the Soviet government's declaration regarding the equal

<sup>55</sup> "K zhenshchinam vsego mira!," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, September 08, 1941, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Klavdiia Nikolaeva, "Sovetskaia zhenshchina na boevom postu," 3.

<sup>57</sup> Militsa Nechkina, "Nepobedimaia sila narodnaia," *Krasnyi flot*, August 2, 1941, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Aleksei Novikov-Priboi, "Nashi zhenshchiny," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, October 7, 1941, 2.



status for men and women in society. Newspapers often claimed that women had done something for the Red Army fighters, soldiers, and servicemen,<sup>59</sup> as if they were not part of the Army. Thus, these statements contained a hidden message, expressed through an implicit opposition of the concepts of 'woman' and 'fighter'/'soldier'/'serviceman'.

The rhetoric on servicewomen in the Soviet Army in the newspapers of 1942 differs from the discourse of 1941. Female soldiers were mentioned more often, even though the coverage tended to be from the perspective of victims and of women whose main contribution was in the rear, the partisan units and medical services at the front. Nevertheless, the public discourse on the issue remained highly controversial. Articles with titles such as 'female patriots', 'glorious female patriots', etc.,<sup>60</sup> did not focus on their large-scale military service involvement, but noted their labour achievements and nursing activities. Thus, in the article 'Soviet Higher School in the Patriotic War', the role of women was presented with an emphasis on replacing men in the rear, but without mentioning their presence on the fronts.<sup>61</sup> A similar picture is reflected in the material entitled 'The Exploits of the Soviet Woman'. According to this text, the social position of the female population of the USSR improved and grew due to the Soviet-German war: "Everything that our women are doing today, now, in the days of the war, in the rear and at the front, at a loom, in the collective farms, in the medical units, in the rear of the enemy, is becoming epic. In the struggle against the enemies of our homeland, the Soviet woman – no matter the task – knows neither fear nor hesitation."<sup>62</sup> This sequence is followed by the example of Z. Kosmodemianskaia, and other female partisans, nurses, women who built fortifications on the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow, factory workers, etc. However, there is no mention of female pilots, machine gunners, snipers and other military specialists.<sup>63</sup>

The number of materials devoted to various forms of participation of Soviet women in the war grew rapidly before March 8, at least since 1942. This trend continued until the end of the Soviet-German war. *Komsomol'skaia pravda* published the article 'Soviet girl' on the front page of the March 8, 1942 issue. It stated that the Soviet women were building the Soviet state on an equal footing with men, and now they were also defending it together. Then it described women's participation in partisan units, in constructing fortifications, their service

<sup>59</sup> For example, see: Klavdija Nikolaeva, "Sovetskaia zhenshchina na boevom postu," 3.

<sup>60</sup> A. Ardov, "Slavnye patriotki," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, February 3, 1942, 2.

<sup>61</sup> "Sovetskaia vysshaia shkola v Otechestvennoi voine," *Pravda*, January 18, 1942, 1.

<sup>62</sup> "Podvigi sovetskoi zhenshchiny," *Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiashchihsia SSSR*, February 19, 1942, 1.

<sup>63</sup> "Podvigi sovetskoi zhenshchiny," 1.

as nurses, health care instructors, doctors, and factory workers. At the end of the article, it was stated that Soviet girls and women worked very well in the rear, and they would not be ashamed to look into the eyes of the heroes of the war (i.e., their men).<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the fact of women's service in the regular Army was not even mentioned.

An article entitled 'Rally of Women Participants in the Patriotic War' appeared in *Pravda* on May 11, 1942. Despite its title, the female combatants were mentioned there only in passing, and the material began with a paragraph where they were entirely forgotten:

"Millions of women of the great Soviet Union walk side by side with their sons, husbands, and brothers, fighting against the brutal Nazi hordes. At the loom, in the fields of collective and state farms, living a united life with the front, they help their relatives and friends who are the soldiers and commanders – pilots, tank drivers, gunners, mortar operators, infantrymen, and sailors – to defeat the hated enemy. The patriotic girls of our country are carrying the wounded out of the battlefield under a barrage of bullets. Glorious female partisans are fighting bravely in the rear of the enemy, avenging their sisters' disgraced honour and mothers' suffering and tears."<sup>65</sup>

The primary roles of women here are rear workers, victims, nurses and partisans. In the following article in the same issue of the *Pravda* newspaper, with the title 'Congratulations to Comrade Stalin,' the female soldiers were given a little more attention. The article asserted that Soviet women were present 'in the fighting ranks of the Red Army....'<sup>66</sup> A little further, it said:

"many Soviet women and girls in the ranks of the Red Army honourably perform combat missions, working as signallers, nurses, paramedics, doctors, etc. The Soviet woman is proud that the country allowed her to defend the homeland together with the Red Army and ensures that a woman's hand will not tremble in the battles with the enemy!"<sup>67</sup>

In the appeal 'To Women Around the World,' which was prepared as a part of the same rally, along with the examples of women who built fortifications on the outskirts of Leningrad and Sevastopol, were on duty during airstrikes, took out the wounded, and made weapons in factories, the machine gunner N. Onilova, who killed more than 500 enemy soldiers during the defence of Sevastopol, was mentioned.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> "Sovetskaia devushka," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, March 8, 1942, 1.

<sup>65</sup> "Miting zhenshchin-uchastnits Otechestvennoi voiny," *Pravda*, May 11, 1942, 3.

<sup>66</sup> "Privetstvie tovarishchu Stalinu," *Pravda*, May 11, 1942, 3.

<sup>67</sup> "Privetstvie tovarishchu Stalinu," 3.

<sup>68</sup> "K zhenshchinam vsego mira," *Pravda*, May 11, 1942, 3.



Some materials often showed pictures of female soldiers. The newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva* on March 18, 1942, published a photograph of four smiling girls in uniform. The photo's caption was: "Thousands of girls volunteered for the Red Army. In the photo are the excellent fighters of the Nth Signal Battalion, where the commander is Comrade Shvets – Marynenkova, Petrova, Trevogina and Shkarina."<sup>69</sup> The note on the anti-Nazi rally of the female workers of Trokhgorka stated: 'the best daughters of the Soviet people went to the front and became brave spies, machine gunners, fearless partisans.'<sup>70</sup> The article published on December 29, 1942, in the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva* stated that Ukrainian women were bravely fighting against the Germans as doctors, nurses, spies, snipers, and bombers.<sup>71</sup> An article from the *Pravda* newspaper (March 23, 1942) mentioned female pilots at the front.<sup>72</sup> In addition, sometimes, in the press, one could come across isolated reports about the training of female snipers. For example, the material 'The girl-snipers' published on October 22, 1942, in the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia pravda* stated that the unit of female snipers of Vseobych (general compulsory training) of the Railway district of Voroshilov achieved considerable success. The women showed promising results in shooting and trained hard in any weather.<sup>73</sup>

In general, in 1942, the Soviet periodicals, along with attempts to omit or minimize the presence of women in the ranks of the armed forces on the front line, almost openly began to call them to join the Army. The Soviet armed forces had extremely high losses in the first years of the war: 3,137,673 in 1941, 3,258,216 in 1942, and 2,312,429 in 1943,<sup>74</sup> while they lacked male conscripts and recruits. Because of this, the Soviet government was interested in recruiting women to the Army. At the same time, by analysing the peculiarities of the public call for women to join the Army and the coverage of women's military service in the periodicals, it becomes clear that the authorities tried to use female troops in the military without substantially changing gender roles. In particular, the article 'Soviet girl! Master the military specialities,' published on March 25, 1942 in *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, presented information about Soviet girls who fought at the front alongside their husbands, brothers, and dads.

<sup>69</sup> "Tysiachi devushek ushli dobrovol'tsami v Krasnuiu armiiu," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, March 18, 1942, 1.

<sup>70</sup> "Antifashistskii miting rabotnits Trekhgorki," *Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiaschikhssia SSSR*, May 8, 1942, 1.

<sup>71</sup> "Udary ukrainskikh partizan," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, December 29, 1942, 3.

<sup>72</sup> "Sobranie aktiva zhenskoi molodezhi v stolitse," *Pravda*, March 23, 1942, 1.

<sup>73</sup> "Devushki-snaipery," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, October 22, 1942, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Grigorii Krivosheev (ed.), *Rossia i SSSR v voynakh XX veka: poteri vooruzhionnykh sil* (Moskva: OLMA-PRESS, 2001), <https://bit.ly/3uYudp8>, accessed September 24, 2022.

Along with examples of female partisans, L. Zemskaia described her experience as an anti-tank gun operator. She wrote: "If an enemy shell tore off my hand, I would fight with one hand. If I lose my legs, I would crawl to the beast herd and destroy it with a grenade. If my eyes are torn out, I would see the enemy with the eyes of my heart, and I would not miss."<sup>75</sup> The article called on other young women to master military skills. However, the call for girls to become military pilots, machine gunners, air defence specialists, etc., was justified by the strong desire of women to acquire such a profession:

"We can and must take care of the direct military training of women and girls. We sent women to the Army, at the forefront, in exceptional cases: we have enough men's reserves for it. However, this does not mean we should limit the opportunities for combat training of Soviet female patriots who sincerely want to take up arms. If a young Soviet female patriot is eager to master a machine gun, we must allow her to realise this dream. If a Soviet girl wants to become a sniper, we have no right to deny her the realisation of her dream. If a Soviet girl has mastered equestrian sports before the war and wants to master the cavalryman's weapon, we must help her to do this."<sup>76</sup>

It is worth noting that these and other similar articles, which called on women to join the Army and fight against the enemy in battle, argued that this was necessary to attempt to finish the war in 1942.<sup>77</sup> These texts stated that this was feasible if everyone, including women, did their best to accomplish it. Thus, they tried to impose on society the idea that the presence of women on the battlefield as soldiers was not the result of the defeats of the Red Army and the lack of human resources, but rather the outcome of the ardent desire of the women themselves, as well as a reflection of the attempt to end the war as soon as possible.

Although many women served in the same combat positions as men and could cope with their duties, they continued to be described in the periodicals as 'the weaker sex.' Even the materials devoted to their combat experience emphasised their perceived inferiority. For example, the article 'Russians are Fighting with Exceptional Skill and Unsurpassed Fiery Rage' asserted that 'even women and children are fighting against hordes of conquerors.'<sup>78</sup> In this context, the word 'even' is an apparent attempt to emphasise that those categories of the population

<sup>75</sup> "Sovetskaia devushka! Ovladevai voennymi special'nostiami," *Komsomol'kaia pravda*, March 25, 1942, 1.

<sup>76</sup> "Sovetskaia devushka!," 1.

<sup>77</sup> For example, see: "Ovladet' voennym delom – dolg kazhdogo sovetskogo patriota," *Pravda*, July 7, 1942, 4; "Kliatva sovetskikh zhenshchin," *Pravda*, May 11, 1942, 1.

<sup>78</sup> "Russkie boriutsia s iskliuchitel'nym masterstvom i neprevzoidennoi plamennoi iarost'iu," *Pravda*, December 12, 1942, 4.





that joined the struggle were considered the most vulnerable and, therefore, they could not compete effectively with the 'stronger sex.' In a real fight, however, the one who is stronger physically does not always win. Success in the fight depends largely on factors such as the combat position, the availability of weapons, their class and suitability, the ability to spot the enemy before he spots you, the ability to move quickly and hide, etc.

The authorities maintained the concealment of the scale of women's presence in the military through means of censorship.<sup>79</sup> In the summary of materials censored in 1942, it is indicated that 13 materials reporting on the mobilisation of women into the Red Army were withdrawn from publication.<sup>80</sup> Revealingly, , from June 10 to August 15, 1943, the film 'Presentation of the Guard Banner to the Female Aviators' was prohibited from being shown because it became evident that all three squadrons of the regiment consisted of women.<sup>81</sup>

However, the government allowed the publication of numerous materials devoted to specific female heroic figures. One of the most striking examples of the construction of Soviet heroines was the case of the sniper L. Pavlichenko. Materials about her began to appear in periodicals more and more often, starting from the summer of 1942. Information about the outstanding female combatant was published in general articles about the snipers of the USSR, but also in texts dedicated to her personally. The portrait of L. Pavlichenko and a note about her were published on September 5, 1942, in the column 'Youth in work and battle' of the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva*.<sup>82</sup> The text reported that this female sniper was a student of the history department. During her military activity, she reportedly won the Order of Lenin, took part in the battles for Odesa and Sevastopol and killed 309 enemy soldiers. In the letter published in the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia*

<sup>79</sup> For more information on the Soviet censorship and propaganda, see Gennadii Kostyrchenko, "Sovetskaia tsenzura v 1941—1952 gg.," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 11-12 (1996), 87-94; Elena Petrovicheva and Ilia Triakhov, "Tsenzura v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941-1945 gg. (na materialakh Vladimirskego kraia)," *Vestnik Leningradskogo gosud. un-ta im. A.S. Pushkina. Ser. Istorii* 4, no. 1 (2015), 49-59; Andrei Sergeevich Gorlov, "Sovetskaia propaganda v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny: institutsional'nye i organizatsionnye aspekty" (Kandidat nauk diss., Russian State University of Tourism and Service, 2009), <http://www.dslib.net/istoria-otechestva/sovetskaja-propaganda-v-gody-velikoj-otechestvennoj-voiny-institucionalnye-i.html>, accessed May 31, 2023.

<sup>80</sup> "Svedeniia ob iziatiakh tsenzury za 1942 g. 11/I-43 g.," in the *Sovetskaia propaganda v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. «Kommunikatsiia ubezhdeniia» i mobilizatsionnye mekhanizmy*, eds. Aleksandr Livshin and Igor' Orlov (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2007), 193.

<sup>81</sup> "Iz svodki iziati tsenzury s 10 iunია po 15 avgusta 1943 g. 20 avgusta 1943 g." in the *Sovetskaia propaganda v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. «Kommunikatsiia ubezhdeniia» i mobilizatsionnye mekhanizmy*, eds. Aleksandr Livshin and Igor' Orlov (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2007), 656.

<sup>82</sup> "Molodezh' v trude i v boiu," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, September 5, 1942, 2.

*pravda* on September 19, 1942, L. Pavlichenko revealed some details about her everyday life as a sniper. In particular, she wrote that on the streets of Sevastopol, children asked how many Germans she had killed the day before and were very upset when the woman admitted that there were days when she did not kill anyone.

The sniper called on Soviet 'sisters and brothers' to master their weapons and kill the enemies even more zealously.<sup>83</sup> In the Soviet press, L. Pavlichenko was presented as an effective sniper representing Soviet youth.<sup>84</sup> Sometimes, however, the female sniper was described primarily in gendered terms. For example, V. Gaibova's article highlighted the fact that German officers called the 'girl with a sniper rifle' the 'elusive "Bolshevik Valkyrie"'.<sup>85</sup> In V. Lavrenev's *Untamed Heart* story, L. Pavlichenko was described as 'fragile and feminine'. At first, some Soviet soldiers did not even believe the stories about the sniper's expertise, but later expressed admiration for her talent. As for the Germans, according to V. Lavrenev, they recognised her talent and openly tried to lure her to collaboration, but the girl remained faithful to her homeland.<sup>86</sup> Another 'public' Soviet heroine who fought with weapons in her hands was the machine gunner N. Onilova.<sup>87</sup> The orphan, brought up in an orphanage, went to the front in 1941. Her directness, devotion to the communist regime and willingness to self-sacrifice represented the desired image of the Soviet citizen.<sup>88</sup>

In 1943, there was a clear tendency to increase the number of female fighters in the USSR's armed forces covered by the press. This change was due to two factors. The significant growth in the number of female soldiers (235,025 women were mobilised in 1942)<sup>89</sup> made it impossible to ignore them completely in the public discourse, and the need for further human resources prompted Soviet ideologists to increase the number of materials dedicated to female soldiers, which was expected to inspire the female recruits to serve more devotedly. In 1943, the mobilisation of women continued, but the number of the mobilised was slightly lower – 194 695.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Ljudmila Pavlichenko, "Za chto ia ikh ubivaiu," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, September 19, 1942, 3.

<sup>84</sup> D. Zaslavskii, "Knut i priianik," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, October 2, 1942, 4; "Za schastlivuiu molodost'!", *Pravda*, September 6, 1942, 1.

<sup>85</sup> V. Gaibova, "Stalinskoe plemia," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, December 15, 1943, 3.

<sup>86</sup> V. Viktorov, "Rodina bogatyrei," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, December 1, 1942, 3.

<sup>87</sup> "Geroini Sevastopol'skoi oborony," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, March 8, 1942, 4; "Na frontakh Otechestvennoi voiny," *Pravda*, March 20, 1942, 2; V. Jakovlev, "Sevastopol'tsy," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, December 8, 1942, 3; "Komsomol v Otechestvennoi voine," *Krasnyi flot*, December 23, 1942, 3.

<sup>88</sup> For example, see "Anka-pulemetchitsa," in *Za rodnoi Sevastopol'*, ed. Petr Garmash (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1983), 41.

<sup>89</sup> *Velikaia Otechestvennaia bez grifa sekretnosti. Kniga poter'*, 38.

<sup>90</sup> *Velikaia Otechestvennaia bez grifa sekretnosti. Kniga poter'*, 38.



At the All-Union rally of mothers and wives of soldiers, in 1943, the representation of mothers of servicewomen was much higher than in the previous year. In addition, the speakers emphasised that many women were soldiers of the regular Army. In particular, the mothers of the dead sniper N. Kovshova and pilot M. Raskova were present at the event. In her speech, the latter stressed that she received letters from women at the front and in the rear daily. For example, the female representatives of Bashkortostan promised to continue her famous daughter's work.<sup>91</sup>

The article 'Heroic Daughters of the Soviet People' emphasised that "the Soviet woman proved to be great and powerful in the war! The Russian woman, described enthusiastically in the best pages of our literature, has risen to her full height, full of love and anger, energy and inexhaustible mental strength."<sup>92</sup> Detailing the contribution of women to the country's effort in the war, the authors first emphasised their work in the rear, where they took up the 'male' positions in production, agriculture, and supply. However, their presence in the Army was not forgotten. It was noted that the woman "... found her place in the ranks of our army, in its medicine units, in partisan units and on the battlefield, where, like Liudmila Pavlichenko, she smashes the enemy with the fire of hate."<sup>93</sup> However, the article provided no information on the scale of this phenomenon.

A short note about Soviet snipers, published on May 28, 1943, mentions that among them were not only men, but also women: "Abduzvaleeva and Shalashnova, girl-snipers who voluntarily went to the front, also shoot well. In two days, both killed two Nazis."<sup>94</sup> Materials dedicated to female machine gunners and tank drivers followed those about female snipers. The note 'Exciting Meeting' referred to N. Onilova's sister-in-arms G. Markova, who also took a direct part in the battles as a machine gunner and spy, and who had combat injuries.<sup>95</sup> V. Davydovych's article is devoted to M. Hrudistova, who first went to the front as a nurse, and later changed her profession and became a machine gunner.<sup>96</sup> The article 'The Tank 'Boevaia Podruga' is Ready for Combat!', published on August 27, 1943, brought up the example of M. Oktiabrskaiia, who lost her husband at the front, paid for the construction of the tank at her own expense, called it 'Boevaia Podruga' (it can be translated into English as 'Fighting Girlfriend') and decided to become its mechanic-driver. At the time of publication, the woman had mastered the tank

<sup>91</sup> "Vsesoiuznyi miting zhenshchin-materei i zhen frontovikov," *Pravda*, April 14, 1943, 3.

<sup>92</sup> "Geroicheskie docheri Sovetskogo naroda," *Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiashchikhsia SSSR*, January 13, 1943, 1.

<sup>93</sup> "Geroicheskie docheri Sovetskogo Naroda," 1.

<sup>94</sup> "Vystrely snaiperov," *Vecherniiaia Moskva*, May 28, 1943, 1.

<sup>95</sup> "Volnuiushchaia vstrecha," *Vecherniiaia Moskva*, October 21, 1943, 2.

<sup>96</sup> V. Davidovich, "Pulemetchitsa," *Vecherniiaia Moskva*, November 23, 1943, 3.

driving skills and was ready to go to the front. M. Oktiabrskaiia claimed: "When I get behind the wheel of the tank, I will take revenge on behalf of all women and children tortured by Hitler's thugs. It will be the happiest day of my life."<sup>97</sup>

Descriptions of the exploits of the Soviet servicewomen often focused on how many enemies they had killed. Often these figures were exaggerated and differed from article to article. For example, the most widespread data is that machine gunner N. Onilova killed more than 500 soldiers.<sup>98</sup> However, L. Uspensky's note titled 'The City of Maritime Glory' mentioned that 2000 enemies were allegedly killed by her.<sup>99</sup> It is worth noting that such exaggerations were widespread in the Soviet public discourse even before the war. The totalitarian state often tried to show itself and its inhabitants in a favourable light. In this case, these exaggerations represented a way of enhancing patriotism and intimidating enemies.

In addition, the publications on famous Soviet female soldiers appeared in the periodicals on the occasion of their deaths. In particular, when the death of the famous pilot M. Raskova was reported, on January 9, 1943, several Soviet newspapers published an article titled 'In Memory of the Hero of the Soviet Union Marina Raskova,'<sup>100</sup> written by her brothers and sisters-in-arms. Its text focused on the fact that she was a brave pilot, a heroine of long-distance flights, and a mentor of Soviet pilots.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, it emphasised the modesty of the heroine and the fact that M. Raskova believed that 'Soviet aviation was created and existed to protect the peace.'<sup>102</sup>

The most objective in covering the presence of women at the front as fighters were the texts of the Soviet Komsomol leaders and its members. For example, a letter from Komsomol members and youth of the USSR to Stalin referred to the examples of Heroes of the Soviet Union and even tried to adhere to the principles of gender equality by naming among them two women and two men – Viktor Talalikhin and Natalia Kovshova, Ilia Kuzin and Maria Polivanova.<sup>103</sup> In contrast, in the various appeals and slogans of the Central Committee of

<sup>97</sup> "Tank 'Boevaia podruga' k boiu gotov!," *Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiashchikhsia SSSR*, August 27, 1943, 3.

<sup>98</sup> For example, see Klavdiia Nikolaeva, "Sovetskaia zhenshchina na boevom postu," 3.

<sup>99</sup> Lev Uspenskii, "Goroda morskoi slavy," *Krasnyi flot*, November 14, 1943, 4.

<sup>100</sup> "Pamiat' Geroia Sovetskogo Soiuzo Mariny Raskovoi," *Izvestiia Sovetov deputatov trudiashchikhsia SSSR*, January 9, 1943, 4; "Pamiati Geroia Sovetskogo Soiuzo Mariny Raskovoi," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, January 9, 1943, 4; "Pamiat' Geroia Sovetskogo Soiuzo Mariny Raskovoi," *Pravda*, January 9, 1943, 4.

<sup>101</sup> "Pamiat' Geroia Sovetskogo Soiuzo Mariny Raskovoi," 4.

<sup>102</sup> "Pamiat' Geroia Sovetskogo Soiuzo Mariny Raskovoi," 4.

<sup>103</sup> "Pis'mo komsomol'tsev i molodezhi Sovetskogo Soiuzo tovarishchu I. V. Stalinu," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, October 28, 1943, 1.



the CPSU (b) during the war, the Heroes of the Soviet Union are referred to exclusively as ‘sons.’<sup>104</sup>

As noted above, the tradition of publishing most of the materials devoted to female soldiers (and to women’s participation in the war, in general) on the eve of International Women’s Day, on March 8, which began in 1942, was kept in the following years. For example, in 1943, several materials were published before or around that date. The issue of women’s service in the Soviet armed forces during the war was covered in an appeal of the women from Moscow to Stalin. On the eve of the holiday, they reported to the ‘leader of the people’ about the contribution of Soviet women to the fight against the enemy. The appeal emphasised that, when the enemy aimed to reach Moscow, women defended the city together with men – they went to the anti-aircraft gun sites, became firefighters, etc. In addition, “thousands of women from Moscow joined the ranks of the Red Army – they serve as snipers and machine gunners, signal officers and bombers, nurses and partisans.”<sup>105</sup> The text gave examples of the exploits of some of these women: Z. Kosmodemianskaia, E. Poltavskaia and A. Lukovina-Hrybkova, N. Kovshova, and M. Polivanova.

The appeal of the chairpersons of the women’s councils of the Siberian Military District to Stalin on the eve of International Women’s Day stated that

“Siberian women, alongside their husbands and brothers, are fighting the hated enemy on the fronts of the Patriotic War. Siberian Guards Captain Quartermaster Krylova, Senior Sergeant Solomina, Sergeant Tkacheva, Chief of Medical Service Verozubova, nurse Alekseeva and many others were awarded orders and medals of the Soviet Union for excellent military service, courage and bravery.”<sup>106</sup>

The Soviet media periodically published photos of the servicewomen. For example, in the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva*, a photo of two smiling female snipers was published on September 7, 1943. The text that accompanied it reported that Corporals R. Skrypnikova and O. Bykova had returned from the stakeout. They are “happy and satisfied: today, each of them killed two Nazis.”<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> For example, see “Lozungi CK VKP(b) k 25-i godovshchine Velikoi oktiabr’skoi socialisticheskoi revoliucii,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, October 28, 1942, 1; “Prizvyvy CK VKP (b) k 1 maia 1945 g.,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, April 28, 1945, 1.

<sup>105</sup> “Velikomu vozhdii narodov, Verkhovnomu Glavnokomanduiushchemu vooruzhennymi silami SSSR, Marshalu Sovetskogo Soiuz, nashemu liubimomu otsu, uchitelii i drugu Iosifu Visarionovichu Stalinu,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, March 10, 1943, 1.

<sup>106</sup> “Moskva, Kremli’ Verkhovnomu Glavnokomanduiushchemu vooruzhennymi silami SSSR Marshalu Sovetskogo Soiuz tovarishchu Stalinu,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, March 17, 1943, 2.

<sup>107</sup> “Efreitory Raisa Skrypnikova i Ol’ga Bykova...,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, September 7, 1943, 3.

Sometime after the beginning of the Soviet-German war, women were recruited to the anti-aircraft and searchlight crews. At times they outnumbered the men in these units, which was reflected in the media. While at the beginning of the Soviet-German war, in 1941, Soviet newspapers glorified male members of searchlights and anti-aircraft crews,<sup>108</sup> in 1943, women were mentioned frequently in these roles. For example, a small article in the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva*, published on July 31, 1943, stated: "Together with the Red Army soldiers, the airspace of Leningrad is guarded by anti-aircraft girls who have voluntarily joined the ranks of the armed defenders of the heroic city. The girls thoroughly mastered the military skills and became the leading combatants of the batteries."<sup>109</sup> A photograph depicting female anti-aircraft gunners running to the battle positions after the alert was given.

### **Decrease of published materials on female soldiers against the background of victories of the Allied powers**

In 1944, there was a significant decrease in the number of materials on women's service in the Red Army, compared with the previous year. After 1944, the advantage in the war was clearly on the side of the Allied Powers. The losses in the armed forces were significantly lower than in the previous years (1,763,891 in 1944 and 800,817 in 1945<sup>110</sup>). Thus, the Soviet government did not need to recruit more women into the armed forces. Therefore, such a sharp decline in the number of materials about them in the periodicals was probably due to this fact.

That year, several materials about female soldiers appeared on the eve of March 8. For example, the authors of the article 'Heroic Daughters of the Soviet Land' devoted a separate paragraph to the female soldiers:

"Many brave female patriots came under the banner of our armed forces and became snipers, signal officers, anti-aircraft crew members, pilots, and medical workers of the Regular Army. The feats of the Heroes of the Soviet Union, Natalia Kovshova and Maria Polivanova, went down in the history of the war, and 75 girl snipers of the 1st Baltic Front, who continue their work, killed two and a half thousand Nazis in three months. For posterity, people's memory will preserve the bright image of a young pilot, Lieutenant Lilia Litviak, who shot down twelve German planes and died bravely in an unequal air battle. The Soviet people proudly heard, in one of the orders of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, the name of Major Evdokiia Bershanskaia, the commander of the night light bomber regiment that distinguished itself during the destruction of the German bridgehead in the Kuban, and is now called Tamansky."<sup>111</sup>

<sup>108</sup> S. Bogatyrskii, "Prozhektoristy," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, July 31, 1941, 2.

<sup>109</sup> "Vместе s krasnoarmeitsami ...," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, June 29, 1943, 3.

<sup>110</sup> Grigorij Krivosheev (ed.), *Rossia i SSSR v voinah XX veka: poteri vooruzhionnykh sil*.

<sup>111</sup> "Geroicheskie docheri sovetskoi zemli," *Krasnyi flot*, March 8, 1944, 1.



Even those materials that did not ignore the presence of women in the armed forces often interpreted it according to the usual set of stereotypes about male and female gender roles. For example, the article by the Heroine of the Soviet Union, sniper L. Pavlichenko, devoted to women at the front and in the rear, highlighted their presence in the Soviet armed forces in combat positions. It gave examples of their heroism through the rhetoric about a 'caring woman's hand' that defends her cities, takes care of male soldiers, restores cities destroyed by the enemy, enthusiastically works in factories in 'male' positions, etc.<sup>112</sup> In this text, L. Pavlichenko called on women to work even harder for the needs of the front, as the future decisive victorious battles required more resources.

Compared to 1943, the periodicals increased the mentions of female snipers and pilots. The article 'Girl Snipers,' published on June 6, 1944, in the newspaper *Krasnaia Zvezda*, mostly focused on the combat experience of sniper R. Shanina. However, it also mentioned her sisters-in-arms, the recipients of the Order of Glory K. Poshlina, L. Gurkova, E. Khozeva, P. Larina, and L. Kolpakova. According to the article's author, Major J. Miletsky, all these women were highly respected in their unit.<sup>113</sup> The note 'Glorious Female Patriots,' published on June 23, 1944, in the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, was also dedicated to women snipers. A photo showing nine servicewomen in uniform (senior sergeants A. Smirnova, N. Selianina, V. A. Krohalyova, S. Anashkina, I. Poligalova, Z. Shmelova, and junior sergeants N. Barinova, V. Nikolaeva, A. Shamanova) accompanied it. The note's text stated that a meeting of the snipers of one of the Red Army units was held: 'In a short period, the girl-snipers of the unit killed 427 Germans.'<sup>114</sup>

In 1945, the number of materials devoted to women in the war decreased even further, including the references to women who served in the military and worked in the rear, but also to those who described the atrocities they suffered. This was due to the significant advantage of the Allied forces over the enemy forces and to a clear awareness of their pending victory. There was no longer a need to convince the population to join the armed forces, the partisan detachments, or go to work in military factories. At the same time, materials about women in the war, including their military service, did not entirely disappear.

The number of articles on women continued to be disproportionately large in the first half of March, 1945, on the eve of the International Women's Day. Thus, in the newspaper *Stalinskii Sokol*, issued on March 7, 1945, one page is entirely devoted to glorifying women's exploits. It contains several articles and portraits of six Heroes of the Soviet Union: N. Meklin, R. Gasheva, A. Popova, E. Zhigulenko,

<sup>112</sup> Pavlichenko, "Geroini fronta i tyła," 3.

<sup>113</sup> Ia. Mileckii, "Devushki-snaiperi," *Krasnaia zvezda*, June 6, 1944, 3.

<sup>114</sup> "Slavnye patriotki," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, June 23, 1944, 2.

I. Sebrova, and K. Riabova. The article 'Soviet Female Patriots' was primarily devoted to women's work in collective farms, factories, and other activities in the rear. Only the second part of the article mentioned that women fought on the fronts of World War II. However, there are many questions regarding this description. First, it was presented after a quotation of Stalin's phrase:

"In the name of the honour and independence of the Motherland, Soviet women and youth show bravery and heroism on the labour front. They proved worthy of their fathers and sons, husbands and brothers, who defended the Motherland from the Nazi inhuman forces."<sup>115</sup>

Therefore, as soon as the readers have formed in their minds a picture whereby men were fighting at the front and women were working in the rear, they were confronted with the fact that some other women fought together with the men. Once again, the article used a somewhat strange wording, widespread in the first years of the war, asserting that women "... fight side by side with the Red Army soldiers on the fronts of the Patriotic War."<sup>116</sup> It turns out that the authors of this article did not think of female soldiers as a part of the Red Army, contrary to the reality on the ground.

N. Ignatova's article 'Heroines' was also published in the same newspaper. She paid more attention to female soldiers, but constantly compared them to men. For example, the author asked: "What helped them? What allowed them to embark on this difficult path, to take on a task that not every man can cope with? And how well they performed it! Earnestly, boldly, skilfully!"<sup>117</sup> In the end, the author concluded that the reason for this success was that a woman was not only '... the source of life on earth, but also a fighter for life.'<sup>118</sup>

The issue of the newspaper *Krasnyi voin* published on March 8, 1945, also had a whole page dedicated to women. Its title was eloquent enough: "Soviet Women with Feats in the Rear and at the Front Are Bringing Forward the Time of Our Complete Victory over the Enemy."<sup>119</sup> Below this headline, there were four articles with the following titles: 'National Honour' (about the mother-heroines),<sup>120</sup> 'Our Front Brigade' (about the best industry workers),<sup>121</sup> 'Why I Went to the Front' (about the nurse N. Klochko),<sup>122</sup> and 'The Girl from Kashira' (about the military

<sup>115</sup> Klavdija Kirsanova, 'Sovetskie patriotki', *Stalinskii sokol*, March 7, 1945, 3.

<sup>116</sup> Kirsanova, "Sovetskie patriotki," 3.

<sup>117</sup> N. Ignatova, "Geroini," *Stalinskii sokol*, March 7, 1945, 3.

<sup>118</sup> Ignatova, "Geroini," 3.

<sup>119</sup> "Sovetskie zhenshchiny podvigami v tylu i na fronte priblizhaiut chas nashei polnoi pobedy nad vragom," *Krasnyi voin*, March 8, 1945, 3.

<sup>120</sup> "Vsenarodnyi pochet," *Krasnyi voin*, March 8, 1945, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Serafima Shundrovskaja, "Nasha frontovaia brigada," *Krasnyi voin*, March 8, 1945, 3.

<sup>122</sup> Nadja Klochko, "Pochemu ia poshla na front," *Krasnyi voin*, March 8, 1945, 3.





pilot, Guards Junior Lieutenant R. Yushina).<sup>123</sup> Thus, only the last article was devoted to a woman who served in the military. This text shows that, on the path to her dream profession, R. Yushina had to fight against stereotypes that a pilot was not a female profession. She first studied at the aeroclub and later became an instructor there. In 1943, Yushina began her military career. She fought in the Kuban, Crimea, Belarus, and East Prussia. Talking about Yushina's reasons for joining the Army, the article's author viewed revenge as her main motivation:

“A girl from Kashira crossed thousands of kilometres of air combat route. She saw the Soviet cities and villages destroyed by the enemy; she smelled the burning of her native land, devastated by a fierce German. And she vowed to take revenge for everything: for the ashes of cities, for the dead comrades, for the girls tortured by the Nazis, for the thousands of Soviet people burned in the furnaces of Maidanek.”<sup>124</sup>

In his article ‘Daughters of the Motherland,’ published on March 10, 1945, M. Bobrov wrote about two famous pilots – Heroes of the Soviet Union Guards Major E. Nikulina and Guards Senior Lieutenant R. Gasheva. Both fought in the 46th ‘Taman’ Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment, whose members were known as ‘night witches.’ Describing R. Gasheva's first combat experience, the author emphasised that the woman felt great joy ‘when, during the first flight, she saw an enemy craft sinking into the abyss!’<sup>125</sup> The reasons that prompted E. Nikulina to go to war included revenge for her native city of Smolensk, destroyed by the Germans.

Also, in 1945, the number of photographs in the press pieces dedicated to women at the front increased significantly. Mostly, these were portraits of female fighters in uniform. Thus, in the issue of *Komsomol'skaia pravda* from March 13, 1945, there was a photo of snipers R. Shanina and Z. Shmeleva during their service.<sup>126</sup> Detailed textual information accompanied the illustrations and photographs.<sup>127</sup> Sometimes, such portraits of female soldiers in the periodicals could be found even during the first months after the end of the war in Europe. For example, the issue of the newspaper *Krasnyi voin* of July 21, 1945, included a picture of S. Danute – the famous Lithuanian machine gunner who had killed more than 100 Nazis.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>123</sup> S. Ruben, “Devushka iz Kashiry,” *Krasnyi voin*, March 8, 1945, 3.

<sup>124</sup> Ruben, “Devushka iz Kashiry,” 3.

<sup>125</sup> N. Bobrov, “Docheri Rodiny,” *Stalinskii sokol*, March 10, 1945, 4.

<sup>126</sup> “V Germanii,” *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, March 13, 1945, 2.

<sup>127</sup> “Slavnye patriotki nashei rodiny,” *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, March 8, 1945, 2.

<sup>128</sup> “Bolee 100 gitlerovtsev...,” *Krasnyi voin*, July 21, 1945, 1.

In May 1945, it was reported that the exhibition 'Komsomol in the Patriotic War' received new exhibits – portraits of female Heroes of the Soviet Union G. Maslova and E. Chaikina by P. Vyuyev; V. Kashcheeva and T. Makarova by A. Osipov; and O. Kolesova by artist M. Lapshov.<sup>129</sup>

### Conclusions

The Soviet newspapers are an essential source for studying the policy of the communist regime regarding the service of women in the armed forces of the USSR and its propaganda dimension. Based on the frequency of these materials, the date of their publication, and the content, it is possible to make informed assumptions about the need of the Soviet armed forces for female personnel during a particular period of the war, as well as to evaluate and assess the government's propaganda concerning female soldiers, in general. However, the thematic articles gave almost no specifics about the service of women in the armed forces of the USSR as a mass phenomenon. For instance, they did not provide data on the establishment of women's military units, general statistics on the presence of women in the Army, conscription data, etc. The totalitarian regime kept this information secret, unlike other members of the anti-Hitler coalition. When such data were leaked to foreign media, the Soviet government sometimes tried to refute it.

The only specific details that appeared in Soviet periodicals concerned information about some heroines of the frontline (for example, L. Pavlichenko, N. Onilova, N. Kovshova, M. Raskova, and S. Danute). However, one needs to be careful in using these data because, even in these cases, the relevant information is not always the main aim of these materials. These publications were propagandistic; they aimed at enhancing patriotism and mobilising the population, rather than at giving relevant information on women's activities at the front.

In many materials published in the Soviet periodicals during the war, there was either no place for female combatants, or they were only briefly mentioned. The materials concerning women's efforts in the war emphasised their activities in the rear. At the same time, most cases dealing with women in the periodicals were dedicated to the description of Soviet women as a vulnerable category of the population and as victims, although the Soviet government recruited women to the Army on a large scale and, in contrast to many other countries, did not forbid them to undertake combat roles.

At the beginning of the war, in 1941, the Soviet newspapers often emphasised the lack of need for women in the Army, as the country seemed to have enough male human resources. At the same time, the government created women's military

<sup>129</sup> "Portrety devushek-Geroev Sovetskogo Soiuz," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, May 14, 1945, 4.



units, such as special air regiments. Most of the material about women at the front published in the Soviet periodical press dates back to 1942-1943, when the Army desperately needed female resources, while the authorities tried to prompt the female population to join the military ranks. Since 1944, when the Allied forces gained the upper hand in the war, the number of materials about servicewomen declined significantly. Most of these articles were published, both in 1944 and in the following years, on the eve of International Women's Day.

Thus, the admission of Soviet women to military roles resulted from the catastrophic losses of the Soviet Army in the early days of the war. It was not beneficial or expedient for the Soviet authorities to highlight the significant scale of women's presence in the Army, because it could undermine the construction of the image of Soviet women as victims of war and as an auxiliary force. Therefore, in the Soviet discourse of the war years, in the beginning, the authorities tried to hide or deny the presence of women as soldiers at the front, and, when this became impossible, to focus on individual heroic cases. These exemplary narratives, on the one hand, symbolised the patriotism of Soviet citizens, and on the other, looked like conspicuous exceptions from the rule. Consequently, most female veterans of the Soviet-German war became a marginal group in the postwar period. They generally hid away their combat awards and kept silent about the very fact of their military service.<sup>130</sup>

### Rezumat

Materialele din presa periodică sovietică (în special, articolele publicate în ziare) reprezintă o sursă importantă pentru studierea politicii regimului în domeniul serviciului militar al femeilor în cadrul forțelor armate ale URSS. Pe baza frecvenței publicării acestor materiale, dar și reieșind din data apariției acestora în presă și din conținutul lor, este posibil să facem anumite presupuneri și să formulăm concluzii în privința necesităților legate de cadrele feminine în rândurile forțelor armate sovietice, în timpul unei anumite perioade a ostilităților militare. Aceleași surse ne permit să evidențiem și să evaluăm trăsăturile generale ale propagandei guvernului sovietic privind soldații de sex feminin din armată. Cu toate acestea, articolele tematice respective aproape că nu conțineau detalii specifice despre serviciul militar feminin din cadrul forțelor armate ale URSS în sensul unui fenomen generalizat, de masă. Astfel, aceste articole nu ofereau informații privind crearea unor unități militare feminine, statistici generale referitor la prezența femeilor în armată, date despre mobilizare și recrutare etc. Regimul totalitar

<sup>130</sup> Svitlana Aleksiiyevych, *U viiny ne zhinoche oblychchia* (Kharkiv: Vivat, 2016), 156.

sovietic considera că aceste informații trebuie să rămână secrete, spre deosebire de ceilalți membri ai coaliției anti-hitleriste.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** presa periodică; URSS; femei; forțe armate; războiul sovieto-german.

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