Soviet women at war

Professor Roger Markwick expounds on the decisive contribution Soviet women on the home front made to the Red Army’s victory over Nazism in the Second World War. Here, he explains what motivates his research into an untold story of paradoxical loyalty to Stalin’s draconian state, wartime roles that challenged gender norms and the sheer struggle to survive unimaginable hardships.

Could you introduce yourself and provide a brief overview of your work?

I have been fascinated by Russian history for as long as I can remember, captivated by its dramatic sweep and why the Soviets’ huge social experiment went so badly wrong. I’m also intrigued by the interplay between historical writing (historiography) and the political present – the way in which historical discourse can influence how a society depicts itself. The advent of perestroika under Gorbachev in the 1980s, in which fierce arguments about the Soviet past became intrinsic to its political transformation, and ultimately its demise, enabled me to marry these two passions in my PhD research.

What led you to research Soviet women at war?

In essence, it derives from my PhD research on Soviet historical revisionism in the 1960s Khrushchev era. I was struck by the degree to which the Second World War had shaped a generation of historians who were at once Soviet loyalists and Soviet critics: a ‘loyal opposition’. I realised the war was a watershed in Soviet history. My endeavour to answer the question of how, in the face of total war, an overwhelmingly peasant society witnessed women transgressing traditional gender norms by taking up arms is the book co-authored with Dr Euridice Charon Cardona: Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War. I’m presently researching the other side of this story: the role of Soviet women on the home front, which is the focus of an Australian Research Council-funded project with Professor Dr Beate Fieseler of Heinrich-Heine University, Germany.

Do you think Soviet women on the home front contributed to the war effort only by reason of political coercion, or did they consent through a sense of patriotic duty?

A combination of both, it seems. Younger, urban women – those brought up in the 1930s under Stalin – tended to be more enthusiastically patriotic and pro-Soviet. Women in the countryside were far less so; as a legacy of forced agricultural collectivisation and the destruction of the Orthodox Church in the early 1930s, they were often hostile to the Soviet political system. However, there is no doubt too that appeals to motherland, motherhood and family loyalty to menfolk on the frontlines resonated with and motivated many women on the home front.

What do you think modern generations can learn from your research?

The achievements of women in the Soviet Union, notwithstanding the fact that they occurred in a society that was in the throes of force-marched modernisation and total war, confirm that gender, not biology, determines the social roles of the sexes.

How would you like to see your work advance in the future?

In two years it will be the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution. I would like to give that decisive event, which erupted incidentally on International Women’s Day, 8 March 1917, an ordinary human face rather than simply a political one. I would also like to revisit the question of why the Soviet system collapsed – did it simply fall, or was it pushed?

THE INVASION OF the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany and its Axis allies on 22 June 1941 unleashed an apocalyptic, genocidal war that took the lives of nearly 27 million Soviet citizens. The ultimate victory of the Red Army in what the Soviets deemed the ‘Great Patriotic War, 1941-45’, may be ascribed in good part to the efforts of the Soviet home front, which was overwhelmingly female.

Mass conscription of able-bodied men into the Red Army was promptly followed by an influx of women into previously male-dominated sectors of employment. If it was not for the dogged toil of Soviet women, who constituted the majority labour force in wartime industry and agriculture especially, the gears of the motherland would undoubtedly have ground to a halt.

UNEARTHING THE FACTS

Rendering an accurate historical representation of the wartime lives of Soviet women is no small task; not only because of the archival research required, but also because the Patriotic War has become integral to Russian national pride. Such is the sacralisation of the patriotic, heroic narrative of The Victory, that critical historical analysis is almost blasphemous. Historians are confronted with the challenge of writing history according to invariable facts. The extraordinary hardship endured by women on the home front has been largely obscured by the heroic, patriotic narrative. For instance, Soviet wartime propaganda assured Red Army soldiers fighting on the frontline that their wives and children at home were well cared for. The reality was often otherwise, with women frequently begging authorities to meet their most basic needs.

Having scoured the archives, Professor Roger Markwick of the University of Newcastle, Australia, and Professor Dr Beate Fieseler of Heinrich-Heine University, Germany, have unearthed considerable evidence of the plight of women on the home front and of their indispensable role in what was undoubtedly the bloodiest of all conflicts in the history of warfare. Several key questions have played on the minds of these researchers: what sustained the seeming loyalty of women
Drawing on hitherto untapped primary sources, an Australian Research Council-funded collaboration between The University of Newcastle, Australia, and Heinrich-Heine University, Germany, casts new light on the crucial contribution Soviet women on the home front made to the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War.

To the Soviet war effort, notwithstanding draconian repression under Stalin and the severe wartime deprivation? And to what extent, if at all, did women taking on largely masculine wartime roles contribute to their emancipation?

It is unsurprising that this project, and the questions it asks, draws on the enduring research interests and expertise of Markwick and Fieseler. Historical revisionism was the subject of Markwick’s PhD thesis and subsequent book, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia: The Politics of Revisionist Historiography 1956–74*, Fieseler, who has extensively researched the terrible fate of Soviet war invalids, is a leading specialist in Russian and Soviet gender history.

**SURVIVAL WITHOUT LIBERATION**

Soviet authorities exhorted working women, boasting of their emancipation from women’s traditional domestic burdens. While Soviet women in the 1930s were often undertaking male jobs long before their feminist western counterparts, at the same time, Soviet women were urged to assume traditional family roles, returning to them without demur at war’s end. Indeed, the centrality of family in Soviet patriotism, manifest in the term ‘motherland’, made motherhood a particularly admirable occupation, particularly to redress the demographic crisis due to catastrophic wartime losses.

Archival sources speak not of liberation but of survival as the principal wartime motive of Soviet working woman. Vira Sirova, a mother of three, featured in a 1943 communist party report, exemplified the predicament of those women who could not supplement their husband’s army allowance by working. Sirova was unable to work; her children too sickly to be left alone; she resorted to burning her possessions so as to keep her apartment warm through the unforgiving winter.

Other women took on the most gruelling, dangerous work. Under the slogan ‘Every log a blow to the enemy’, women laboured in the timber industry. Logging was a perilous occupation, often carried out by Gulag forced labour. As an essential wartime industry, women in the timber industry worked under military regulations.

In recompense for this gruelling labour, women were allotted only the most basic, subsistence rations. Afflicted by malnourishment, hunger and ill health, women aged 18-45 could be ‘mobilised’ to work, except those with very young children. Factory employment was one’s best chance of survival, since they provided wartime rations. But conditions were so harsh that women employees still abscended in search of better conditions, despite draconian punishment, including Gulag labour.

**REWARD AND PUNISHMENT**

Punishment was not the only means of ensuring compliance. Role models were made of women who exceeded their quotas at work, a ploy to instil home front ardour and encourage more women to join them. Excellence at work was also, ostensibly, rewarded with the provision of better rations and conditions.

The Communist Party and the Young Communist League (Komsomol), working through workers’ councils (Sovets) and enterprise committees, propagated the war effort. Coercion alone would not have sufficed to sustain the war effort, unless the party state could amass support among crucial sectors of the populace both on the home and military fronts. “As a result of the vast male losses, in the aftermath of war women bore a triple burden: reproduction, industrial reconstruction, and re-establishing domestic life, including coping with millions of returned servicemen, often traumatised or invalided,” Markwick concludes.

This novel addition to the historiography of the war against Nazism on the Eastern Front, attests to Soviet women’s decisive but little recognised contribution to the victory.

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**I WAS A HORSE AND A MAN**: WOMEN, STALINISM AND THE SOVIET HOME FRONT, 1941-45

**OBJECTIVES**

To illuminate the roles and experiences of Soviet women on the home front in the Second World War in order to determine – given the draconian Stalinist state – what motivated women to support the war effort, or otherwise, and to what degree – if at all – women’s wartime assumption of masculines roles was emancipatory for Soviet women.

**KEY COLLABORATORS**

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