



Andriana Susak went straight from Maidan to the warzone. She joined a volunteer battalion and served as a shock trooper under the nom-de guerre "Malysh" ("Kid").

PHOTO: KLEOPATRA ANFEROVA

Experiences of women at war

Servicewomen during WWII and in the Ukrainian armed forces in the conflict in Donbas

by **Olesya Khromeychuk**

Women's relationship to war is more complex than men's "because society with its traditional gender divisions of labor has assigned the official task of fighting to men," argues Nicole Ann Dombrowski.¹

This does not mean, of course, that women do not fight in wars. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it in her now classic text, historically "women were known to take part in bloody wars or vendettas; they showed as much courage and cruelty as males."² The problem of women's invisibility as actors of political violence, therefore, is not in their supposed inability to fight in wars. The problem is in societies' ongoing inability to see women in roles that do not fit traditional gender norms. Beauvoir herself and many scholars before and especially after her have tried to make women visible in all spheres of life, including warfare. Nevertheless, the dilemma of how to represent women in the context of war persists. If non-military (although not necessarily unmilitarized) women are usually fitted into categories of civilian victims and mothers-sisters-daughters-lovers-wives of military men, those who become members of the military are usually perceived as exceptional female warriors.³ Indeed, female members of the military are relatively rare, but, as Barbara Alpern Engel argues, they form "a substantial minority."⁴ Ignoring them because of their numerical inferiority would mean neglecting war stories of thousands of individuals who can offer a narrative of war different to the customary heroic tale of male glory on the battlefield. However, emphasizing their participation in war carries the danger of hailing them precisely as extraordinary, thereby strengthening the assumption that "ordinary" women are inherently peaceful and that the job of fighting wars should be reserved for men whose gender predisposes them to soldiering. The ways in which these dilemmas are dealt with (or ignored) are indicative of the attitude of state and society towards its female citizens.

abstract

This paper examines women's contribution to war and the perceptions of that contribution by comparing experiences of women in the Red Army during the Second World War and in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the conflict in the Donbas region. Through comparative analysis, the paper argues that in both cases structural gender discrimination was ingrained in the military, which accepted women's contribution to war in times of need, but treated that contribution as subsidiary, thereby distorting men's and women's experiences of warfare and facilitating the instrumentalized militarization of women.

KEYWORDS: Gender, war, militarization, Second World War, conflict in Donbas.

In this paper, I examine perceptions of servicewomen's contributions to war by comparing two cases: women in the Red Army during the Second World War and in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the conflict in the Donbas region. In spite of their distance in time and the difference in scale and type of respective conflicts, the similarities in the two cases are startling. I focus on the discrepancy between the contribution of women to the war effort and the perception of this contribution within their respective societies and demonstrate that in both cases, regardless of their roles in warfare, women were perceived as an auxiliary force, supporting men in fighting wars. Specific individual women who did not fit into the auxiliary category have been presented as exceptional, but rather than challenging gender stereotypes, accentuation of their exceptionality has been more likely to reinforce the general perception of women's contribution as essentially supportive. I argue that structural gender discrimination was ingrained in the military, which accepted women's contribution to war in times of need, but treated that contribution as subsidiary. Such auxiliarization of most women's contributions to war on the one hand, and the turning of others into exceptional heroines, reinforces male participation in war as the norm, distorts the reality of war as experienced by both women and men, and facilitates the instrumentalized militarization of women. There is a significant body of literature analyzing

the participation of women in the Red Army. It is rich in detail about the types of roles women performed and the attitude the Soviet state adopted towards their recruitment.⁵ The literature on contemporary servicewomen in the Donbas is much scarcer, and I will rely on the few published sources available to date.⁶ In both cases, I will refer to interviews with the former servicewomen, which I collected in 2015–2016, and other sources such as published interviews and media material.

Servicewomen's partial visibility in the two cases discussed here means that their exact numbers are not known. The Red Army estimates vary significantly. Oleg Budnitskii relies on an official Soviet state estimate and argues that "according to the Ministry of Defense, 490,235 women were called up by the army and the navy during the war".⁷ Anna Krylova states that more than 900,000 women served in the Soviet Armed Forces during the Second World War.⁸ Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon-Cardona offer an even higher estimate. They write:

Between August 1941 and October 1944, the GKO [State Defense Committee] and NKO [People's Commissariat for Defense] decreed the mobilization of an estimated 712,529 women for the Red Army and Navy [...]. 463,503 were still in the Red Army as at 1 January 1945; 318,980 of these women were actually on the fighting front. If we add the 512,161 "civilian volunteers" (*volnonaemny[i] sostav*) in the Red Army, but not in the Red Navy, as at 1 January 1945 (medical, food, supplies, laundry, repair personnel, etc.) [...] the total number of women who served with the Soviet armed forces in the course of the war was just in excess of one million.⁹

The number that is usually quoted in literature about Red Army women is 800,000.¹⁰

In the Ukrainian case, there is also no clear figure for the participation of women in what is officially known as the anti-terrorist operation (ATO).¹¹ According to the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, as of October 9, 2017, 6,282 women had received the "status of participants of military action for their participation in the anti-terrorist operation".¹² This figure, however, did not include a number of categories of servicewomen: those who served in the war zone illegally, volunteers who worked at the front irregularly, around 500 women who were part of the National Guard, and those who were part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces but did not serve in the ATO zone for any lengthy period.¹³ Indeed, Maria Berlins'ka, who is one of the authors of the first sociological study of women who are fighting in the Donbas region, says that no one has objective figures on servicewomen engaged in the ATO because of their complex status at the front.¹⁴

In the cases of both the Red Army in WWII and the conflict in Donbas, most women who joined the conflicts did so voluntarily. Reina Pennington states, "Legal precedents in the Soviet Union made it possible for women to fight. Women's political and legal equality was guaranteed by the constitution of 1918, which also established universal military service for men, and voluntary military service for women."¹⁵ The *Vsevobuch* (*Vseobshchee voennoe obuchenie*, Universal Military Training Administration) aimed to ensure that citizens between eighteen and forty years

of age received military training; the *Osoaviakhim* (*Obshchestvo sodeistviia oborone, aviatsyonnomu i khimicheskomu stroitel'stvu*, Union for Assistance with Defense, Aviation, and Chemical Construction) provided paramilitary training for civilians, and the *Komsomol* (*Vsesoiuznyi leninskii kommunisticheskii soiuz molodezhy*, All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) "was charged with instilling political militancy in the young".¹⁶ Women took part in all of these. When the Soviet-German war broke out, many women of the generation who grew up persuaded by the state that the war was imminent and that all citizens had to prepare for it rushed to seek ways to contribute to the war effort. However, as Markwick and Charon-Cardona point out, "To the profound disappointment of most politically active young women, when the hour came to exercise their rights to bear arms alongside their menfolk, they were rebuffed."¹⁷ In the USSR, gender equality was proclaimed in principle, but not implemented in practice. As Pennington states, "women were usually relegated to lower-ranking positions at work and filled many traditional women's roles at work and at home."¹⁸ Anne Eliot Griesse and Richard Stites argue, "Pronatalist, sexist, and suspicious of spontaneity, Stalinism assured that the Soviet high command would have a deeply ambivalent attitude to the participation of women in the next war."¹⁹ This ambivalence led to the chaos in the initial recruitment of women during the Second World War.

Krylova states, "Throughout 1941, rank-and-file male officials in military commissariats were on their own in deciding what to do with young women. There were neither clear orders nor general direction from the centre." She argues that at this stage, the leadership did not encourage women to volunteer, but did not prevent them from entering the armed forces either.²⁰ Stalin and his leadership were not willing to openly change their conservative position on the role of women, and they did not wish to provide evidence for Nazi propaganda that stated that the Red Army was in

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such a desperate position that it recruited female battalions.²¹ The reality of the huge losses in the initial stages of the war, however, meant that recruitment of female combatants could not be ruled out. The leadership therefore decided to conduct covert recruitment of women into combat roles, and the first secret order that gave permission to form three women's air regiments was issued on October 8, 1941.²² The losses persisted, rapidly draining male resources, while at the same time there was no shortage of women willing to serve at the front. Necessity proved to be the mother of invention, and in 1942 militarization of women occurred on a mass scale. This stage of women's recruitment, however, as Markwick and Charon-Cardona argue, "was not done with any fanfare,"²³ and "in spring 1942, a second, secret phase of women's mobilization [...] was launched by Soviet authorities, desperate to compensate for nearly 6.5 million, overwhelmingly male, casualties."²⁴ The drive to militarize



Red Army women snipers celebrate victory in 1945.



PHOTO: RIA NOVOSTI

A Red Army woman sniper on the Baltic Front, ca. 1944.

women on the one hand, and the official rhetoric that continued to emphasize that women's primary responsibility was maternal on the other, resulted in the "stubborn official ambivalence towards women soldiers".²⁵ Women were thus encouraged to join the military, but their involvement in the army was not widely advertised and their position in the armed forces was often unclear. However, this did not prevent thousands of women from volunteering to enter the military and from going to the front.

Many saw their contribution to the war effort in the context of the defense of their motherland. What constituted the motherland, however, differed for many of them. Some understood it in ideological terms as propagated during the pre-war decades by the Komsomol; others were simply keen to defend their towns, villages, and homes from the occupying enemy.²⁶ As Engel states, "Soviet citizens rallied to the defense of their homeland, some because of their feelings about the government, the Communist party, and the leadership of Joseph Stalin, others despite their feelings."²⁷ There were also, however, women whose mobilization was not strictly voluntary: some Komsomol members simply received a draft notice to join the army. Feoktista Rabina from Novosibirsk was one of them:

I was summoned by the call of the Party. [...] I came to work and they told me that a draft card was waiting for me. I was told: "Here is your referral to the city Party committee." I took it and went there. They met me there and said: "You have to go to the frontline". I thought: "How can I go to the frontline if I am not a nurse, don't have medical education?" [...] But I was a candidate for Party membership. [...] So they sent me to work for the KGB.²⁸

Women went to the front not only out of patriotic duty or the call of the Party, but for a variety of other reasons. Markwick and Charon-Cardona argue that "some young women wanted revenge; some yearned for excitement; others were lonely or simply anxious to escape the appalling deprivation and duress of life on a half-starved home front."²⁹ Like men, women had no say

in where they would be posted, but their gender meant that they were viewed not as soldiers in their own right, but as substitutes for men.

Recruitment of women to fight in the Donbas has also been characterized by chaos and lack of clear information.³⁰ In the Maidan protests, which preceded the start of the hostilities in eastern Ukraine, women were often marginalized, encouraged to fulfill traditionally feminine roles as cooks and caregivers and presented as helpers of male revolutionaries, despite the fact that they took a very active part in the protests.³¹ As soon as the protests in central Kyiv had ended, the conflict in the Donbas began, and some of the most active participants of the protests departed for eastern Ukraine from the still upturned Independence Square, the main site of the protests. They formed the core of the volunteer battalions, and included women. Among them was Iuliia Tolopa, an 18-year-old Russian national and nationalist, who had come to Kyiv to see whether the portrayal of events in Ukraine by the media in her own country corresponded to reality.³² During the Maidan protests, her Russian nationalism evolved into Ukrainian nationalism, and she decided to fight on the side of the Ukrainian state and joined one of the buses heading to the ATO zone. She said that when she got to Luhans'k, a battalion commander decided who out of those who had arrived on the bus should be accepted to serve in his battalion and who should be sent back. Tolopa passed the "test", and she was given a rifle and started to fulfill combat duties.³³ At first, Tolopa served as a "combat fighter" (*strilets*) and later became an infantry fighting vehicle commander.³⁴

Another woman who went straight to the warzone from the Maidan was Andriana Susak. Like Tolopa, she joined a volunteer battalion. With the *nom-de-guerre* "Malysh" ("Kid"), she served as a shock trooper (*shurmovyk*), but was officially registered as a seamstress.³⁵ This peculiar situation can be explained by the fact that the recruitment of women into the armed forces in Ukraine is regulated by a restrictive list of occupations that are open to women.³⁶ This meant that until June 2016, servicewomen were formally accepted into only a limited number of positions in the military, performing traditionally feminine tasks such as that of a



Luliia Tolopa was 18 years old, and a Russian nationalist when she changed opinion and decided to join the Ukrainian side of the conflict.



Maria Berlins'ka, right, is one of the authors of the first sociological study of women who are fighting in the Donbas region.

nurse, musician, librarian, accountant, hairdresser, tailor, baker, chef, etc.³⁷ The law, however, was observed mostly on paper. The initial high losses of the army, the widespread evasion from conscription, and a steady flow of female volunteers willing to go to the frontline meant that the commanders on the ground accepted women and gave them the tasks they were most suited for, disregarding their gender and the official regulations.³⁸ Therefore, when it came to recruitment, the commanders in the Donbas, like those in the Red Army, were left to their own devices, improvising according to immediate circumstances. Women therefore ended up serving not only in “permitted” positions, but also as combat fighters, reconnaissance officers, snipers, etc. However, they either had no documentation at all, and thus were at the frontline illegally, or found themselves in a semi-legal position by being registered as office administrators, chefs, accountants, etc., while performing other duties.³⁹ Two years into the conflict and following much pressure from female veterans, the list regulating women’s recruitment was expanded by 63 positions and included jobs such as sniper, driver, gunner, reconnaissance agent, and others, making it possible to legalize some of the women who were already performing these tasks.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as Tamara Martsenyuk, Ganna Grytsenko, and Anna Kvit argue, “Two-thirds of all military positions remain inaccessible for women in Ukraine,” and the expansion does not apply to all branches of the armed forces or to positions at officer level.⁴¹

As in the case of the Red Army, the women who have volunteered to fight in the Donbas have done so for different reasons. Motivations have ranged from feelings of guilt and helplessness as their compatriots were risking their lives on the frontline to following their children or partners who were already in the military, to hoping to build their own military careers.⁴² Many also have spoken of the desire to fight for Ukraine, but as in the case of the women in the Red Army, this has not always translated into loyalty to the state or a particular ideology; it refers rather to the idea of the defense of the motherland and its people (*narod*).⁴³ As in the Red Army, the actual roles women have

performed in the Ukrainian army defy traditional gender norms, but women continue to be perceived as an auxiliary force temporarily helping men to fight the war.

The roles women played in both cases are difficult to separate into categories of combatant and non-combatant. Enloe argues that the problem lies in the fact that the term combat is “infused with patriarchal understandings of masculinity (that is, what femininity is not).”⁴⁴ She specifically addresses the question of servicewomen who are not registered as combatants, but whose roles require them to be located in the combat zone: “Nurses, in practice, have served in combat regardless of official prohibitions banning their presence there. They have served in combat not because of unusual individual bravery – the stuff of nursing romances – but because they have been part of a military structure that has needed their skills near combat.”⁴⁵ The Second World War saw not only Soviet female pilots, snipers, and gunners, but also non-combatants deployed at the frontline and in direct danger. According to Pennington, “More than 40 percent of all Red Army doctors, surgeons, paramedics, and medical orderlies, and 100 percent of nurses, were women.”⁴⁶ Engel argues, “Only the troops themselves had greater casualties than women physicians who served with rifle battalions.”⁴⁷ In the case of the conflict in the Donbas, the term “woman combatant” is an oxymoron, and in reality “seamstresses, accountants,” and “office managers” are used in combat. Andriana Susak explains her situation at the frontline:

My commander came and said: “Andriana, we need to make a combat order. Everyone is being registered as part of the fire support company. How on earth can we explain that we have a seamstress [at the frontline]?” And I said: “Tell them that I am sewing socks for the boys. Include me in at least one combat order for all the time I have spent in the warzone.”⁴⁸

The commanders, therefore, were fully aware of the precarious position of their servicewomen who performed combat roles.⁴⁹



Hanna Kolomiitseva served during the Second World War as a wireless operator and air gunner.

The cases of the Red Army and of the Ukrainian Armed Forces confirm, albeit differently, the reluctance of military officials to reconcile the reality of servicewomen's experiences with their official position in the military hierarchy. Enloe states that "to close the gap between myth and reality would require military officials to resolve their own ideological gender contradictions, something many are loathe to do."⁵⁰ Thus, in both cases, although women ended up fulfilling a great variety of roles, those in traditionally feminine jobs were perceived as helping the men to fight the war, while those performing combat duties were seen as male substitutes, engaging in these positions temporarily and only due to the circumstances, and their exceptionality was emphasized. In both cases, there was a degree of secrecy when it came to the recruitment of women; their contribution was accepted, but not widely advertised.

Jean Bethke Elshtain states, "War is a structure of experience."⁵¹ We tell war stories in order to make sense of war experiences. These stories, in turn, perpetuate our understanding of war, including its gender order. Elshtain argues that although the accepted view of women is of "the noncombatant many" – "embodying values and virtues at odds with war's destructiveness, representing home and hearth and the humble verities of everyday life" – there also exist tales of the "ferocious few," that is, "women who reversed cultural expectations by donning warrior's garb and doing battle."⁵² However, as Elshtain points out, "their existence as fact and myth seems not to have put much of a dent in the overall edifice of the way war figures in the structure of male and female experience and reactions."⁵³ As both cases studied here demonstrate, fulfilling "masculine" duties does not guarantee being treated the same as men. In a situation where labor in the military is divided according to traditional perceptions of gender roles, a soldier of even the lowest rank is likely to have a higher

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standing than a woman, regardless of the nature of her actual involvement in the army. An assumption that participation in the military can grant marginalized groups, including women, a chance to acquire full citizenship, and, subsequently, a greater degree of equality has been criticized by scholars and refuted by numerous examples in history.⁵⁴ The two cases discussed here demonstrate not only that "exceptional" women did not necessarily acquire full citizenship, but point to the fact that this very "exceptionality" sometimes prevented them from attaining the respect of a society guided by gender stereotypes. The labels that were applied to them also extended to the "ordinary" servicewomen.

One of the popular tropes in stories of Red Army servicewomen is their supposed promiscuity. Red Army women have frequently suffered from the label of a "field wife" (*pokhodno-polevaia zheni*, PPZh) and the assumption that they went to the frontline to find themselves a husband.⁵⁵ Hanna Kolomiitseva, who served during the Second World War as a wireless operator and air gunner, recounted that her father made her promise not to form any intimate relationships in the military: "When I was joining the army, my father told me, 'You are my pure [*chistaia*] girl; I beg you to come back the same.' I gave him my word. He said, 'Don't let anyone kiss you on the lips, only on your cheek.' And that is what I did."⁵⁶ Given the ratio of women to men at the frontline, and that soldiers were granted leave only in the event of serious wounding or "in exceptional cases for special achievements", sexual relations at the front took many forms from consensual to coercive.⁵⁷ The practice of securing a "field wife" was widespread – for women, this often meant that one sexual partner, especially of a senior rank, would protect them from the sexual harassment of others; for men, especially in senior positions, it meant a feeling of entitlement to

seek sexual favors from servicewomen under their command. Anna Bebykh, a searchlight operator during the Second World War, had to prematurely leave the hospital where she was being treated for her wounds because she was being sexually harassed by a man in a senior position:

When I was in the hospital, I was harassed by a major. Can you imagine? He kept trying to kiss me. For goodness sake! I started to scream. I discharged myself from the hospital. I said to the doctor, “What is this?” And she answered, “Well, they got accustomed to it.” I said, “Who made them accustomed to it?” [and she answered]: “Well, there are different people out there.”⁵⁸

It is notable that Bebekh's story includes not only complaints about men's behavior, but that it also hints that women themselves were to blame for such behavior and confirms the widespread disdain for the so-called “field wives”. However, Pennington argues, “male veterans seem more likely to categorize military women as ‘field wives’. Female veterans often distinguish between a small group of ‘field wives’ and other women.”⁵⁹

Seven decades later, military women still find it difficult to avoid the assumption of promiscuity. Iryna Kosovs'ka, a member of the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, explicitly compares the way women were perceived in the Second World War and how her contemporaries were viewed. She states that “both during and after World War II many women who had served in the army faced unfounded insults, gossip, and humiliation based on the assumption of their promiscuity.” She continues by arguing that such views are still held in Ukraine today: “Many elderly women I encountered claimed that promiscuity was the only reason why a girl would join the army.”⁶⁰ The perception of women who come to the frontline as potential sexual partners rather than military comrades also persists among military men. This creates the need to secure a “protector” against others' sexual harassment, thereby creating a modern-day equivalent of the so-called “field wife”. Although such semi-consensual relationships put women into precarious positions, and make them highly dependent on their male partners, as Marta Havryshko argues, violence in military partnerships in the conflict zone receives little attention because it occurs in the context of mass extreme violence, where individual expressions of violence can seem insignificant.⁶¹ In the case of the conflict in the Donbas, with only a few exceptions, the discussion of gender-based violence perpetrated by “our boys” as opposed to the enemy remains taboo.

One of the reasons for the lack of discussion of the mistreatment of women by their fellow military men is the heroization of military men and the adoption of militarized culture in which heteronormative militarized masculinity is celebrated and unchallenged. While the Red Army men were hailed as heroes, regardless of their actual achievements in the military, decorated women were often reluctant to wear their medals at victory parades in order to avoid the accusation that their awards were not for “combat services” but for “sexual favors” (“*za boevye zaslugi*”/“*za polovye uslugi*”). Zoia Nyzhnichenko said that when

she told people that she had served as a nurse during the war, some replied, “Oh, yes, she served there, we all know *how*”.⁶² Women therefore preferred to hide their military past. Karen Petrone tells the story of Vera Malakhova, who also served as a nurse and even took part in the Battle of Stalingrad:

Her husband encouraged her to wear her medals to a May Day parade a few years after the war, saying “Put them on. You’re going with me, you earned them. I know everything there is about you, and you earned them honestly.” Nevertheless, when her husband lagged behind, a man accosted her, saying “Here comes a frontline W[hore].”⁶³

As this story demonstrates, a woman needed a man, in this case her husband, to “guarantee” her adequacy as a soldier, though even such guarantees did not fully protect her from the public perception.

While women in contemporary Ukraine can talk about their experiences in the military more openly, their stories still cause a certain degree of discomfort in a society that largely expects women to be at home rather than fighting in a war. Oksana Ivantsiv, one of the makers of a documentary film about women who fight in the Donbas, says that women find it hard to return from the war zone for the fear of being rejected by society:

I heard stories about men who are ashamed to go to the train station to meet their wives who are coming back from the war, because they feel uncomfortable and do not know how to react. At the same time, we have completely opposite instances when men [returning from war] are welcomed as heroes.⁶⁴

The perception that women should not seem braver than men or be seen to take a leading role is internalized by servicewomen. Susak remembers when during one of the attacks she tried to encourage male recruits to come out from their hiding place:

During one of the assaults, paratroopers hid under the “Ural” [a large army truck], we were fired at, and I had to motivate these young guys somehow. They were really young, twenty, twenty-two years of age. So, I come under this “Ural” and simply drag them out, saying: “Let’s go, there is no fire any more, let’s go, don’t worry!” And they see that I am a woman. [...] I am standing first in line, but the boys say, “Look, at least go to the back, please.” And I say, “Fine, you lead the way, it’s okay.”⁶⁵

Thus, even in times of danger and when the inadequacy of gender stereotypes is obvious, both men and women are prepared to perform traditional masculinity and femininity in order not to disturb the gender order prevalent in the war and dominant outside of the war zone.

Traditional gender norms are not disturbed with any lasting

results even by the existence of celebrated servicewomen such as the Red Army sniper L'udmyla Pavlichenko or the Ukrainian pilot and veteran of the war in Donbas Nadiia Savchenko. Both women might have made women's presence in the war zone more visible, but this did not translate into significant practical improvements for the majority of women in the military.⁶⁶ Individual women who were hailed as heroines were used instrumentally by their respective states. Markwick and Charon-Cardona argue: "Pavlichenko's reputation as a lethal sniper was not just deployed on the battlefield or the home front. Soviet authorities clearly believed the 'heroic' role of women in general and her reputation in particular could sway international public opinion in support of the war against the 'fascist hordes'."⁶⁷ She represented the USSR in the USA, Canada, and the UK, urging the Allies to open a second front in western Europe. The Sunday Mirror's impression of Pavlichenko is very telling about the role she was supposed to fulfill as a soldier and as a woman. The 1942 article details the meeting between the "heroine of Russia's [sic] front line" and "just a woman of Britain":

"I am Mrs. Collett," she said to this sturdy, upright woman the world respects as a soldier.

Then she bent down, placed the flowers in Lieutenant Pavlichenko's hands, and opened her mouth to speak. [...] No words came. She wanted to say so much, but instead, she placed her hand on the soldier-woman's shoulder and talked by looking into her eyes.

Yes, they both understood – the mother and the soldier. To both of them that look meant that one day their children would be free to walk the streets in peace. The ordinary woman of Britain was saying to her counterpart in Russia: "Thank you for helping that day nearer."⁶⁸

These two women, despite the fact that one of them had 300 kills as a sniper to her name, are still presented as women, contemplating the peaceful future as women should.

The situation with Savchenko is similar. After she was captured in the Donbas, she was put on trial in Russia for allegedly directing a mortar attack that killed two Russian journalists in eastern Ukraine and was sentenced to twenty-two years in prison. She quickly became "a symbol both of a new chapter in Ukrainian history – and the ensuing stand-off between Russia and Ukraine."⁶⁹ The hashtag #freesavchenko was used by politicians, diplomats, and activists in the conflict and became synonymous with a call to support Ukraine.⁷⁰ Thus a woman who was once prevented from training to become a pilot because of the gender restrictions in the Ukrainian military suddenly became a heroic figure and an embodiment of Ukraine itself: resilient and defiant, but in need of international support.⁷¹

The examples of Savchenko and Pavlichenko are indicative of a trend in which the roles women take on in the military have little influence on women's wider emancipation. Both women served as role models for other women, but neither of them set herself the aim of ensuring gender equality in the army, and their experience and fame did not suffice to challenge the wider restrictions servicewomen faced. As Dombrowski argues, it would be naïve "to insist that women can transform military culture without understanding how military culture transforms 'women'".⁷² The examples of Savchenko and Pavlichenko, but also those of the less "remarkable" women discussed above, demonstrate that participation alone, even in high numbers and in "masculine" roles, or as outstanding fighters, does not necessarily lead to the reform of the patriarchal culture of the military and beyond. On the contrary, the presence of women in the military as temporary helpers or substitutes for men can in fact serve to reinforce the gender order that is already in place.

An acceptance of gender stereotypes is conducive to the celebration of traditional gender war roles, with the military man at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. Militarization of society, in turn, strengthens traditional gender order outside the war zone. This vicious circle produces a situation in which women's entrance into the military can only be publically visible on a symbolic level. It is difficult to imagine an exhibition telling the story of the USSR's involvement in the Second World War without the famous 1941 poster by Iraklii Toidze "Motherland is calling", depicting a woman wrapped in red garb holding a piece of paper with the military oath on it. The army of loyal children is represented by the rifles behind the woman. While this symbolic image of a woman was omnipresent, the stories of real women were much harder to come by.

The portrayal of "woman" not only as motherland but as a mother was widespread during the war. In the post-war years, when the Soviet population had to come to terms with its colossal losses, the cult of motherhood only grew stronger. Post-war society, which understood heroism as an ultimate value, awarded women who gave birth to five or more

children with the title of "Heroine Mother". Engel states that although in the post-war period "the state-controlled media continued to praise women for their accomplishments and sacrifices on the home front, it virtually effaced their military role. And in postwar monuments, fiction, art, and film the warrior is invariably male and only men fight at the front."⁷³

The collapse of the USSR renewed an interest in the history of the war and women's participation in it. Svetlana Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War* caused a sensation in the post-Soviet countries and beyond, but outside of academic debate, its mark on the way servicewomen were perceived was limited.⁷⁴ Even now it is difficult to find examples of popular rhetoric that challenges the previously established stereotypes. Although female veterans are becoming more and more visible as fewer male vet-

"THE PORTRAYAL OF 'WOMAN' NOT ONLY AS MOTHERLAND BUT AS A MOTHER WAS WIDESPREAD DURING THE WAR."

erans are around to attend the parades, much of the celebratory or commemorative practices related to the Second World War in the post-Soviet region are focused on the the heroic male narratives of the glorious victory. Women's war stories are not excluded entirely, but as in the actual war, they take a subordinate place to the narratives about male soldiers.⁷⁵

In the context of the hostilities in eastern Ukraine, the representation of Ukraine's military history has become increasingly important for the state. Since the Maidan protests and throughout the conflict in the Donbas, the representation of Ukrainian military men as modern-day Cossacks has increased.⁷⁶ The representation of women has continued to emphasize their symbolic and auxiliary place: on the one hand, they have been portrayed as symbols of the motherland, and on the other, their image has been highly sexualized.⁷⁷ Servicewomen have not been entirely invisible, but they have also tended to be objectified, as in a series of so-called patriotic pin-ups depicting scantily-clad women in uniforms from various branches of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, widely circulated on the social media.⁷⁸

As the conflict progressed, the militarization of society became ubiquitously visible from the highly gendered army recruitment posters on the streets of Ukraine – for instance, depicting a little girl saying, “Daddy, will you defend me?” – to the fashion style of Ukrainian politicians.⁷⁹ From the start of the conflict, President Petro Poroshenko could regularly be seen sporting a full military uniform. Battalion commanders-cum-people's deputies preferred camouflage to business suits to attend parliamentary sessions. The former prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, while not wearing a real uniform, chose stylized military jackets for public appearances. This made a particularly uncomfortable sight given the dismal state of the Ukrainian army, which lacked basic uniforms, not to mention the total absence of uniform supplies for servicewomen at the front.⁸⁰

The militarization of society did not stop with politicians' wardrobes. Since the start of the conflict in the Donbas, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (*Ukrains'kyi instytut natsional'noi pam'iaty*, UINP), the central executive body operating under the Cabinet of Ministers, has prepared a number of projects and exhibitions celebrating the military.⁸¹ In contrast to the post-war representation of the Red Army, women have not been excluded from the projects. On the contrary, a special exhibition entitled “War Makes No Exceptions: Female History of the Second World War,” opened in 2016 and has been touring the country since. Among thirteen stories selected by the UINP to tell about women's experiences are several about servicewomen, including three members of the Red Army.⁸² The exhibition recognizes that during the Second World War, “at the frontline, women mastered all military professions: in aviation and the navy, in infantry and cavalry, intelligence, communications and medical care.

There even appeared a linguistic problem, as words such as tank operator, infantryman, and machine gunner had no feminine equivalent.”⁸³ The UINP stresses that “the theme of the tragic and heroic women's fates will also help to make connections with the participation of our female compatriots – the military, physicians, and volunteers – in the contemporary confrontation with Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine,” thus recognizing the parallels between the participation of women in the Second World War and in the ongoing military conflict.⁸⁴ However, the exhibition does not raise the question of the gender inequality within which women functioned in both cases. The parallels highlighted by the UINP emphasize the victimhood and/or heroism of the women, but not the ongoing inadequacy of the legal system, supplies, and even the language used to describe servicewomen's experiences both now and seventy years ago.⁸⁵

The UINP continued to prepare exhibitions on the theme of war and the Ukrainian military tradition, and in 2016 it presented a project called “Warriors: History of the Ukrainian Military.”⁸⁶ Two women were included among the twenty warriors displayed in the exhibition. One represented the women of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army,⁸⁷ and the other depicted an actual ATO veteran, Iryna Tsvila, who was described on the poster as a “warrior of the ‘Sich’ volunteer battalion.”⁸⁸ The word “warrior” (*voiak*) was used in its masculine form, thus highlighting the preference of the official institutions to avoid the feminization of military professions even in language.⁸⁹ While the poster depicted a female warrior, it did not even mention the participation of women more broadly in the volunteer battalions in the conflict in the Donbas. This partial visibility of women thus strengthens the overall image of them as a symbolic and supportive force and emphasizes the prevalent ideas of gender roles.

“THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF WOMEN'S MILITARIZATION, THE PREJUDICES, AND THE GENDER NORMS PREVALENT SEVENTY YEARS AGO CONTINUE TO PLAY A PART TODAY.”

The conflicts discussed here resulted in the militarization of their respective societies. In the USSR, militarization was total, with the economy and much of the population working exclusively for the needs of the army and the front.⁹⁰ In Ukraine, the hostilities in the Donbas region, although of a much smaller scale, also encouraged militarization of many aspects of life.⁹¹ In such contexts, the militarization of women was inevitable, and there were many women who, like men, chose to contribute to the war effort. However, the entrance of women into the military, in both cases, was seen as a contingent measure, and for the duration of the conflict only. Pennington argues that “while women were at the front, the Soviets instituted gender segregation in the educational system and the exclusion of women from the newly created Suvorov cadet schools.” She continues by stating, “Performance was irrelevant to Soviet decision making about whether to allow women to remain in military service, and there is strong evidence that during the postwar period, the Soviet government deliberately obscured women's wartime achievements.”⁹² Tradi-

tional gender roles were also reinforced outside of the military with the heroization of motherhood and the strengthening of pronatalist policies.

In the case of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, it is too early to draw firm conclusions. There is evidence of some reforms, especially the expansion of the list of available positions in the army. Martsenyuk and Grytsenko point out that the Ministry of Defense has hired “an external gender expert, who works closely with the ministry representatives in different structures.”⁹³ The reforms, however, have been introduced as a reaction to the situation on the ground and to pressure from veterans and feminist activists, and they continue to be very limited. As in the case of the post-war USSR, much will depend on the general attitude to gender equality in Ukraine both among politicians in power and in society more widely, which at the time of writing leaves much to be desired.⁹⁴ The experience of women’s active participation in the Second World War, to some extent, shapes the understanding of women’s roles in war and provides role models for women who join the contemporary Ukrainian Armed Forces.⁹⁵ At the same time, the instrumentalization of women’s militarization, the prejudices, and the gender norms prevalent seventy years ago continue to play a part today.

The cases discussed here point to the fact that militarization of women might not only fail in challenging gender stereotypes, but might even result in their consolidation. In both cases, the roles women occupied directly reflected the demands of the army, but their recruitment was chaotic and influenced by gender stereotypes. Women fought in the ranks of a state-sanctioned military and saw their contribution to warfare as part of the defense of the motherland. Their popular image, however, was more linked to the motherland itself than the warriors who defended it. Those women who challenged the stereotype of women as a supporting force did not escape being perceived as women first and foremost. Their exceptionality was instrumentalized by their respective states and simply served to prove the rule. The study of servicewomen’s experiences of warfare juxtaposed with popular perceptions of them leaves a pessimistic impression of the potential of militarization for women’s emancipation and gender equality. Joshua S. Goldstein argues that “the gender-war connection is very complex” and “none of us knows the correct direction or doctrine that will end war, equalize gender, or unlink war from gender.”⁹⁶ He nevertheless believes that the “war system is not set in stone, nor driven by any simple formula, but is alive, complex, and changeable.”⁹⁷ Understanding how gender roles came to be formed within war systems and why they have changed so little over the decades creates possibilities to examine how they can be altered in the future. ❌

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- 74 Svetlana Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1988); Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II* (London: Random House Publishing Group, 2017).
- 75 See National Museum of the History of Ukraine in World War II, <http://www.warmuseum.kiev.ua>, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 76 See Khromeychuk, "Negotiating Protest Spaces," 18–19.
- 77 See Amandine Regamey, "Falsehood in the War in Ukraine: The Legend of Women Snipers," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 17 (2016), para. 24, <https://pipss.revues.org/4222#ftn29>, accessed June 19, 2017. See also Khromeychuk "From the Maidan to the Donbas".
- 78 "Patriotichni pin-ap: zvablyvo oholeni divchata i kamufliazh," [A patriotic pin-up: seductively undressed girls and camouflage], *TSN*, October 2, 2014, <https://tsn.ua/tsikavinki/patriotichni-pin-ap-zvablyvo-oholeni-divchata-i-kamufliazh-371856.html>, accessed June 19, 2017.
- 79 See "Tatu, ty mene zakhystysh? – patriotichni plakaty v Sievierodonets'ku," [Daddy, will you defend me? – Patriotic posters in Sievierodonets'k], *Znaj.ua*, August 27, 2016, <https://znaj.ua/news/regions/15440/tatu-ti-mene-zahistish-patriotichni-plakati-v-syevyerodonecku-foto.html>, accessed June 14, 2017.
- 80 Servicewomen in the Donbas struggled to find uniforms and shoes that fit them and had to either buy these items at their own expense or get them through volunteer organizations. In this, their situation was very similar to that of the Red Army women, who at least in the initial stages of the war had to improvise with uniforms and army boots that were made to fit men and were mostly too large. See Berlins'ka, Martsenyuk, Kvit, and Grytsenko, *Nevydymyi Batal'ion*; Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*; Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*.
- 81 The UINP invented an epithet for the Ukrainian people – an army-nation (*narod-viis'ko*) – thereby militarizing not only contemporary Ukrainians, but also their historic ancestors. See "Vitaemo zakhysnykiv i zakhysnyts' zi sviatom! Ukraintsi – narod-viis'ko," [Congratulations to the male and female defenders on the holiday! Ukrainians are an army-nation], *Ukrains'kyi Instytut Natsional'noi Pam'iati*, 2015, <http://www.memory.gov.ua/news/vitaemo-zakhisnykiv-i-zakhisnyts-zi-svyatom-ukraintsi-narod-viisko>, accessed June 14, 2017.
- 82 See "Viina ne robyt' vyniatkiv. Zhinochi istorii Druhoi svitovoi," [War makes no exceptions. Female history of the Second World War], *Ukrains'kyi Instytut Natsional'noi Pam'iati*, <http://www.memory.gov.ua/news/viina-ne-robit-vyniatkiv-zhinochi-istorii-drugoi-svitovoi-informatsiini-materiali-dlya-zmi-do-v>, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 83 "Viina ne robyt' vyniatkiv".
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 See Khromeychuk, "What place for women in Ukraine's memory politics?". Ukraine is not unique in such an approach to women's history by official institutions. For a discussion of the Polish case, see Weronika Grzebalska, *Pleć Powstania Warszawskiego* [The gender of Warsaw uprising], (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2014).
- 86 "Voyny: Istoriia ukrains'koho viis'ka" [Warriors. History of the Ukrainian Military], *Ukrains'kyi Instytut Natsional'noi Pam'iati*, <http://www.memory.gov.ua/news/voyni-istoriya-ukrainskogo-viiska-ukrainska-povstanska-armiya>, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 87 For further information on the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, see Myroslav Shkandrij, *Ukrainian Nationalism: Politics, Ideology and Literature, 1929–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Oleksandr Zaitsev, *Ukrains'kyi integral'nyi natsionalizm, (1920–1930 roky): Narysy intelektual'noi istorii* [Ukrainian Integral Nationalism, (1920–1930). Sketches on Intellectual History] (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2013); Grzegorz Motyka, *Ukrainska partyzantka 1942–1960. Działalność Organizacji Ukraińskich Nacjonalistów i Ukraińskiej Powstańczej Armii* [Ukrainian partisan movement 1942–1960: The activity of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army], (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, 2006).
- 88 "Voyny: Istoriia ukrains'koho viis'ka". The "Sich" volunteer battalion was formed in June 2014. In December 2015, it became the 4th Company of the "Kyiv" Regiment of the Special Police Patrol Service.
- 89 For a discussion of the use of feminine forms in the Ukrainian language, see Liudmyla Smoliar, "Try prychny, chomu varto vzhlyvaty feminityvy," [Three reasons for using feminine forms], *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, October 28, 2017, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/columns/2017/10/28/227141/>, accessed January 16, 2018.
- 90 See Mark Harrison, *Accounting for War: Soviet Production, Employment, and the Defence Burden, 1940–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert William Davies, Mark Harrison and S. G. Wheatcroft, *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 91 Since the start of the conflict, the defense budget of Ukraine has seen a significant increase. Since 2016, it has been at 5% of the GDP. See "Military Budget," *GlobalSecurity.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ukraine/budget.htm>, accessed June 15, 2017.
- 92 Pennington, "Offensive Women," 819.
- 93 Martsenyuk and Grytsenko, "Women and Military in Ukraine," 36.
- 94 The Ukrainian Parliament refuses to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence because the wording of the document contains terms such as "gender". See Valeriya Shyrokovska, "Dev'yat' zapytan' pro domashnye nasytstvo i Stambul's'ku konventsiyu v Ukraini," [Nine questions about domestic violence and the Istanbul Convention in Ukraine], *Povaha*, October 24, 2017, <http://povaha.org.ua/dev-yat-zapytan-pro-domashnje-nasytstvo-i-stambulsku-konventsiyu-v-ukrajini/>, accessed October 29, 2017; "Ukraine fails to ratify European convention on gender-based violence," *LB.ua*, November 17, 2017, paras. 3, 12, http://en.lb.ua/news/2016/11/17/2351_ukraine_fails_ratify_european.html, accessed June 19, 2017. See also "Ukrainian parliament considers bill to ban elective abortions," *Censor.net*, March 31, 2017, https://en.censor.net.ua/news/434136/ukrainian_parliament_considers_bill_to_ban_elective_abortions, accessed June 19, 2017.
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- 96 Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 413.
- 97 Ibid., 413–414.