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RUSSIAN WOMEN IN THE FACE OF WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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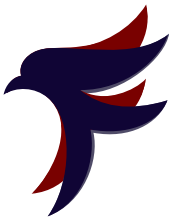
March 2024



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Anti war protester holding a sign about to be detained, in Moscow, Russia, on February 28, 2022 during a demonstration against the war on Ukraine. (Photo by Daniil Danchenko/NurPhoto via Reuters)

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Introduction

Consider the following pieces of a puzzle. Russia's war against Ukraine has revealed stories about the heroic resistance efforts of Ukrainian women[1]: from a grandmother launching a pickle jar against a drone[2] to volunteers with territorial defense units.[3] However, comparable stories have been entirely lacking on Russia's side: How come? Here is another piece: the stories of rape and abuse in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories have shaken the world, with male Russian soldiers featured as systematic perpetrators of war crimes.[4] Were there any female soldiers or pro-Russian civilians involved? The historical background of multiple conflicts across continents does suggest an active women's role as perpetrators of war crimes (including rape) and terrorism, not only victims.[5] Perhaps it is only a matter of time until stories of Russian women involved in these crimes start to emerge. How do these pieces fit together? I delve into these narratives in an information environment that is still extremely limited (particularly in terms of Russian-language sources).

Patriarchal Attitudes: Russian Society and the Military

Initially, the Soviet Union held arguably progressive views, granting women an early right to vote (in 1917), and making a big deal about women driving tractors and working in construction brigades alongside men. However, their prominent entry into the public sphere resulted in a drop in birth rates, leading to increasingly suppressive policies from the 1930s onwards. Stalin pronounced that women and men already were equal, negating any movement for women's rights. This effectively forced women to do double-duty of working full time with no discourse of burden-sharing at home, with the official attitude of turning a blind eye to continuing extensive harassment and abuse.

The Soviet approach towards women veterans has largely been to silence all of them.

World War II was perhaps the peak of women's participation in active combat, with around one million servicewomen making up over 10 percent of the Soviet armed forces—a number that has subsequently declined to under 4 percent at present time.[6] Soviet veteran stories, aptly captured by the Belarussian author Svetlana Alexievich in 1985, reveal traumatic experiences of women fighters perpetrating violence directly, issuing and obeying orders, as well as being subjected to violence by their peers, superiors, and enemy combatants.[7] While these wartime experiences in themselves may not be particularly unusual, irrespective of the fighters' gender, curiously, the Soviet approach towards women veterans has largely been to silence all of them. Women were never particularly celebrated as wartime heroes, and encouraged, instead, to return quietly to the kitchen and nursery[8]—lest their battle achievements overshadow those of the men in their environment, challenge their sense of worth, or undercut the broader culture built around male authority. Notably, an extensive body of scholarly research on the role of Soviet women in World War I and

Cadets participate in a military parade on Red Square May 9, 2017. (kremlin.ru)

World War II, and even Afghanistan consists mostly of Western authors.[9]

Stories of rape or abuse were ever more unwelcome: With a dramatic 21 percent drop in the Soviet male population (along with birthrates), the remaining women wanted to avoid being perceived as damaged goods. While studies of Soviet history remain scarce in this respect, many point to a historical pattern of women's subservience and domestic abuse, and the overall environment of distrustful isolating silence, encouraging everyone in the society to sport a stiff upper lip against life's difficulties.[10] It is worth noting that the UN Office of the High Commissioner established a general link between the prominence of violence against women in a society and its wartime behavior, finding that the culture of violence and discrimination tends to be "exacerbated during conflict."[11] Overall, the Soviet Union seems to have not only retarded, but also reversed Russian progress in terms of gender equality, leaving the society frozen in attitudes and behavioral standards that Europe had shed by the end of the nineteenth century.[12]

In Putin's Russia women have been officially excluded from a variety of jobs, including certain military positions, considered harmful to their reproductive abilities.[13] In public discourse, officials and academics routinely question women's ability to serve in the armed forces, referring to lesser physical abilities and heightened sensitivity—reminiscent of the 1900s' theories on "female hysteria."[14] A 2010 sociology survey conducted at Russia's Military University revealed that 67 percent of women had enlisted in the armed services out of financial necessity (typically single mothers), with no reported link between their effort and pay; only 6 percent were serving as a way to fulfill themselves professionally—these were reportedly mostly single women serving in "feminized roles," such as communications, medicine, or logistical support.[15] Similarly, a 2016 French study based on interviews with women in the Russian armed forces found

the service to be most attractive to financially struggling single mothers or single women, with the military providing not only a stable salary, but also a large potential pool of future spouses.[16]

A 2012 survey revealed that only 7 percent of Russian women consider themselves to be feminist, with 48 percent of female respondents opposing feminism.

The reductionist attitudes towards women are, unfortunately, an illustration of the broader environment, rather than a military-specific exception. For instance, the latest 2020 Global Gender Gap report that includes Russia ranked it 81st (out of 156 countries assessed), with particularly limited political participation and persistent wage discrimination, despite women's skill levels surpassing those of men.[17] As of early 2021, women occupied only three seats in the Russian government, and comprised 16 percent of the Duma (parliament) delegates.[18] Unsurprisingly, in a 2022 Levada public survey on the top-ten most trusted public figures in Russia the responded did not include any women.[19] The situation seems to have hardly changed over the previous decade. A 2012 survey revealed that only 7 percent of Russian women consider themselves to be feminist, with 48 percent of female respondents opposing feminism; only 3 percent of males were supportive of feminist ideas and 45 percent found it disgusting.[20]

Curiously, the same 2012 survey had painted a very similar picture of Ukraine at the time, with 9 percent of women and 4 percent supportive of feminism, 43 percent of women opposing it, and 40 percent of men disgusted by it. However, the intervening years seem to have landed the two societies, and militaries, in a very different place. The conflict that had started in 2014, had brought about a renewed reverence to the historical role of Ukrainian women in combat, with significant military reforms expanding the opportunities for women to serve in the military.[21] However, the culture of harassment remains problematic, especially because of the taboo associated with the subject, ever more so during an ongoing war. The Ukrainian military establishment is still in the process of adapting to accommodate some of the basic needs of the servicewomen and LGBTQ+ persons.

Finally, it is worth noting the overall prominent role of negative gender-based rhetoric and imagery in Russia's war against Ukraine, with Russia regularly calling Ukraine and its leading male figures prostitutes.[22]

Russian Servicewomen at War with Ukraine

The number of women in the Russian army's leading positions had remained minuscule, with the service men viewing their advancement through the ranks "ironically," and often putting up serious physical and psychological barriers (e.g., work/rest schedule infringements, punitive sleeping conditions upon refusal of sexual advances etc.).[23] The Russian Ministry of Defense continued organizing beauty pageants for service women, and their competence was generally regularly challenged in public.[24]

In March 2023, Russia's Ministry of Defense noted that 1,100 women were taking part in the combat operations in Ukraine (less than half per cent of the estimated 360,000-410,000-strong Russian forces in Ukraine in 2023). [25]

Throughout 2023, stories had started to emerge of Russian service women being forced into sexual relations by their superiors with a historical sense of entitlement, and subjected to physical abuse if they refuse.[26] These interviews and earlier academic studies revealed the still prevalent Russian attitudes towards "women at war to be just prostitutes."[27] This paints a picture of Russian servicewomen less like heroic combatants (in contrast to Ukrainian servicewomen or Russian servicemen), and more like the victims of life's circumstances pushed into the army ranks only to be exploited further.

Desperate Recruitment of Women

Meanwhile, as Russian recruitment of additional fighters in 2023 has met with somewhat limited success, the government efforts have recently extended to try and attract more women. [28] Ironically, some of the adverts pitch equal opportunity, inviting Russian women to come and fight "in the same ranks as men"—though the proposed roles were for only cooks and medical staff.[29] In addition, the male-oriented recruitment campaign messaging still consistently portrayed the Russian army as the place to prove and showcase one's masculinity, although, reportedly, attracting new male conscripts frequently also came down to financial incentives.[30] On a side note, it is worth noting that Russia's Wagner Group had recruited a number of male convicts to serve in its ranks for a pardon and a financial reward—a large number of these men had apparently been sentenced for violent crimes against women, and were returning to their (and their victims') environments after fulfilling their contracts.[31]

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Furthermore, by February 2023, the Russian recruitment efforts have reportedly expanded to women in prisons: Around fifty women had been recruited from a Donetsk correctional facility, and several human rights organizations had confirmed that around 100 female prisoners were being transported to the front lines in Ukraine in March 2023.[32] In August 2023, there was another reported instance of around thirty women being recruited from a Russian penal colony.[33] It is not clear whether these women were offered a pardon or other privileges for agreeing to join the armed services (akin to the Wagner Group's prison recruitment tactic for males), or whether they were forcibly moved to the battlefield. Indeed, the Russian government efforts targeting women for military recruitment increasingly, seemed to involve a carrot and stick approach. For instance, at the end of 2022, reports started to emerge of Russian women receiving mobilization summons for service with the armed forces, regardless of their professional background.[34,35]

On the other hand, in the summer of 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defense was reportedly offering sizeable monthly salaries (approximately $1,500 to $4,250) to women under forty-seven willing to contract as

medics and signals intelligence workers.[36]

In addition, in early 2023, several Russian private military contractor companies had reportedly started recruiting women. In March 2023, Gazprom-affiliated PMC *Yastreb* were advertising positions for both men and women from Russia and abroad to join the fight.[37] By October 2023, a PMC *Redut* affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defense was reportedly recruiting women to serve in combat roles (rather than previously traditional support functions).[38]

Women as Violence Perpetrators

And yet, that is not the only story. Consider Bucha—a town that under Russian occupation became one of the iconic war crime sites, shocking the Western world into action. Of the several Russian military units directly involved, Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate has published a list of members of the 64th motorized rifle brigade.[39] Among those 1,648 names, sixty-five (or 4 percent) were women, ranking from Majors and Lieutenants to Privates. The specific type and extent of their involvement is impossible to ascertain without trial (as is true of the listed men), but the very fact that a representative sample of Russian servicewomen in perhaps the most iconic massacre and rape has been overlooked is concerning.

Another, highly questionable, Ukrainian source, *Myrotvorets*, which regularly updates a suggested hitlist with the names and details of Russians purportedly taking part in the war, also includes a number of women: federal administrative deputies and functionaries (especially in the occupied territories), as well as accountants and translators associated with the Wagner group.[40] On the one hand, this brings forth the classic ethical (and legal) dilemma of war on how far removed from the chain of command into the auxiliary functions a person must be in order to still qualify as an enemy combatant. On the other hand, again, the presence of women in the apparatus considered accountable cannot be ignored. One notable entry includes Gizha Tatyana Yurevna—chief petty officer of Ukrainian Naval Forces who had switched sides upon Russian occupation.

In addition, Ukrainian women veterans recounted numerous Russian women in the fighter ranks (from the Donesk separatist republic) being particularly brutal torturers of captured Ukrainians.[41] In line with this, in a sparse collection of evidence, is a recording made public by Ukraine's Security Services of an alleged Russian servicewoman recounting how she tortured a Ukrainian woman.[42]

One must keep in mind the extreme suppression of information coming in and out of the Russian-occupied territories, and the taboo of the subject in the Russian-speaking environment, suggesting the extent of both war crimes and Russian women's involvement in them is likely to be greater still.

The Sniper Narrative

The narrative on civilian women acting as dangerous snipers has curiously permeated both Russian and Ukrainian ranks in this war—dating back to World War II. At that time, the Soviet Union had an elite school training a couple of thousand women as elite special duty sharpshooters—with some of the most prominent names, such as Liudmila Pavlichenko (of Ukrainian background), Rosa Shanina or Natalia Kovshova, promoted as heroes throughout the Soviet Union. Subsequently, the notion seems to have deeply permeated the Russian psyche that any civilian woman of the opposing side could be an undercover sharpshooter—and thus a legitimate target. In addition, the image has conflated any persons armed with

a shotgun with an elite trained sniper. This problematic narrative had already been noted during Russia's war against Chechnya—where it served as a justification for sexual violence against, as well as the killing of, Chechen civilian women.[43] Similarly, with the gray zone conflict going on in Ukraine since 2014, Russians reportedly viewed any woman seen on the contested territory as a potential sniper.[44] Interestingly, a very similar view was reportedly shared by Ukrainians—who also expressed a fear of Russian sniper women.[45] Moreover, in April 2022 Ukraine had actually captured one prominent Russian elite woman sniper, actualizing and feeding the narrative. Similar to other narratives that portray violent women as more dangerous (e.g., Chechen Black Widows, ISIS women fighters, etc.), this one likely draws on a layer of deep psychological fears concerning the loss of male sexual function—thus making violence against such suspects doubly permissive in the minds of the men.[46]

Russian Civilian Women and the War in Ukraine

The ICC arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin has made the news in March 2023—with the commentary entirely overlooking the fact that Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, was co-listed on that warrant for the war crime of deporting Ukrainian children from Russian-occupied territories.[47] Very few women are represented in Russia's political elite—yet it is important to acknowledge their role as accountable participants in the state-wide war campaign.[48] Historical precedents from wartime Serbia or Nazi Germany (among others) indicate the propensity to exculpate women's role in genocidal regimes, assigning them lesser penalties or acquitting them of war crimes altogether, based on gender stereotypes of women as natural caregivers, incapable of violence of their own volition.[49]

The inclination to support not only Russia's war effort, but specifically the weaponization of rape of Ukrainian women, seems to have curiously permeated the attitudes of at least a portion of women in Russian society. In 2022, Ukrainian security services have made public a telephone conversation between a Russian serviceman and his wife, who encouraged him to rape Ukrainian women and is subsequently facing a twelve-year prison sentence for incitement to commit a war crime.[50] Researchers and journalists have pointed to this being but one of multiple such cases of incitement, in addition to civilian women encouraging the men in the army to loot.[51] Another related trend has been for Russian women to slur Ukrainian women online—in comments, videos, and memes, portraying them as inherently inferior and even sub-human, thus justifying the violence, including sexual, directed against them.[52]

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Rather than sensationalizing the individual instances of such beliefs and abuse, it may be helpful to realize a not-uncommon complicity of civilian women in war crimes in recent historical contexts. For instance, Africa's Janjaweed women accompanying fighters

to war and encouraging them towards rape and violence with songs, or women married to ISIS fighters abusing and/or enslaving Yazidi minors and women captured by their husbands.[53] Notably, Russian women have been described by other foreign ISIS fighter wives as being among the most radical converts.[54]

Russian Women and Anti-War Movement

Against this backdrop, it is important to note the prominent role of the traditional anti-war activism of women whose husbands or family members have been called to serve in Ukraine. Historically, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM) has been particularly active: a grassroot movement that formed during the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, and grew to prominence during Russia's war against Chechnya, had successfully lobbied for some improvements in the service conditions in the Russian armed forces, and regularly campaigned for the safe return of Russian servicemen (or at least their bodies).[55] CSM had successfully utilized connections within Russia's political environment, as well as outside and independent media, leveraging the traditional image of women as mothers to make their voices heard in a patriarchal society.[56]

Viewed as part of patriotic families, such women have been able to voice particularly harsh anti-government criticisms for the war against Ukraine.[57] However, with growing government pressure to recruit additional soldiers for the war against Ukraine, and the women's increasingly vocal protests against partial mobilization, their activism has been sidelined and gradually suppressed.[58] In November 2022, President Putin attempted to placate their mounting discontent by a showcase meeting with selected mothers, which was subsequently criticized in the media. However, following this outburst of outrage, members of the Council of Mothers and Wives started reporting being followed by state agents, with some detained on trumped-up drug charges, and at the end of May 2023, the organization was included in the list of foreign agents by the Ministry of Justice.[59]

It is also worth noting the prominent anti-war activist efforts by influential Russian women in the public sphere at the very start of the 2022 war campaign. For instance, a *Kommersant* journalist Elena Chernenko launched an anti-war petition and managed to collect over a hundred signatories from fellow journalists, but was swiftly sanctioned by the government.[60] Similarly, a prominent activist Marina Litvinovich called for a public anti-war protest in Moscow, but was detained.[61]

In anti-mobilization rallies, women comprised 51 to 71 percent of all protesters, and also 45 percent of all persons detained for anti-war activities in 2022.

The 2022 war phase has given a significant boost to overall women's activism and protests: In anti-mobilization rallies, women comprised 51 to 71 percent of all protesters, and also 45 percent of all persons detained for anti-war activities in 2022.[62] By comparison, the large anti-government rallies in 2012 had attracted around 27 percent women protesters.[63] Notably, these women

A visitor holds flowers in front of a monument to Ukrainian poet Lesya Ukrainka on the first anniversary of the beginning of Russia's military campaign in Ukraine, in Moscow, Russia, February 24, 2023. REUTERS/Stringer

detained in Russian prisons were particularly vulnerable to threats, and acts, of sexual violence, as well as being subjected to other tactics of sleep and food deprivation.[64]

The Russian feminist movement has been particularly active in the condemnations of the war against Ukraine—so much so that in April 2023, the Russian Duma considered a bill to pronounce feminism an extremist ideology.[65] Notably, Patriarch Kirill, head of Moscow's Orthodox Church, had denounced feminism as dangerous to the society back in 2013.[66] Despite the limited popularity of feminist ideas noted above, various women's rights groups and LGBTQ activists had long been criticizing Russia's epidemic of domestic violence, and permissive government policies. [67]

In February 2022, the Feminist Anti-War Resistance was one of the swiftest groups to get organized, attracting 40,000 followers on Telegram, and was awarded the Aachen Peace Prize in 2023. [68] The seemingly leaderless movement consists of small anonymous cells operating largely online, and focuses on guerrilla-tactic information campaigns in virtual space, as well as Russia. Yet, this strong grass-root movement seems to have been largely overlooked by Western interlocutors searching for counterparts in Russia.

Indeed, improvised performances and artistic installations have become a prominent form of protest adopted by a variety of activists: crosses and bloody toys strewn about in public places in Russian cities, as reminders of the atrocities committed in Ukraine, or flowers laid at Russian war memorials tied with the ribbons in the colors of Ukrainian flag.[69] In addition, dozens of women and gender-non-conforming activists have been engaging in simple everyday protest expressions, such as putting up anti-war sentiment stickers.[70]

However, not all women's anti-war activities have been peaceful. Several elderly women

Watercolor painting by Katya Muromtseva for “Women in Black Against the War” exhibition, Puhskin House London, May 2023. (Katya Muromsteva/Instagram)

had been detained for attempts to set fire to military recruitment centers—in Irkutsk Oblast in November 2022, as well as Komi Republic in April 2023.[71] In addition, in April 2023, one Russian protester has been detained for killing an ultra-nationalist pro-war blogger in an explosion in a Saint Petersburg café, with multiple by-standers injured in the blast.[72] These violent incidents seem to be perpetrated by individuals unassociated with any of the organizations or initiatives discussed above.

Conclusions

Operating in an increasingly closed patriarchal society, where violence against women is rampant and ever-more culturally ingrained, the spectrum of women's responses to, and activities during, Russia's war in Ukraine war is wider than the conventional media narratives might lead one to believe.

On the military side, the number of servicewomen are relatively small, with many being victimized, and facing discrimination and oppression. And yet, within those ranks, the propensity to engage in looting and violence, potentially including torture and rape, seems to be no less than that exhibited by Russian male counterparts. In a vicious cycle common to many global societies across time and geographies, the victims seem to become the victimizers (i.e., perpetrators) as a means of taking back power. Notably, the struggling military campaign and recruitment efforts have put the Russian government in a position to start reconsidering the attitudes towards women in the military. In contrast, in Ukraine this change has proceeded much more intentionally and quickly.

The perceptual line dividing civilian and military personnel seems to have faded: among Russians and Ukrainians when choosing targets, as well as women in either of those countries when choosing their means of participation. The shared sniper narrative is one lively illustration of this, in addition to Ukrainians portraying Russian mercenary group accountants as targetable combatants, or Russian civilian women engaging in, and encouraging, war-related violence.

Foreign efforts to engage and/or support alternative views in Russia have thus far sidelined women's voices.

On the civilian side, historically, women of Russian military families have been effective in activism and anti-government (although not necessarily anti-war) criticism. However, their growing impact seems to have been perceived as sufficiently threatening to the regime, subjecting them increasing repressions. Meanwhile, the feminist movement has experienced a somewhat surprising rise. Overall, the 2022 war has dramatically activated women in protest movements, ranging from public demonstrations to anonymous guerilla art projects, to online information and resource-sharing campaigns within and outside Russia. Unfortunately, foreign efforts to engage and/or support alternative views in Russia have thus far sidelined women's voices—consequently, they have failed to grasp the issues and harness the resources of this growing activist segment.

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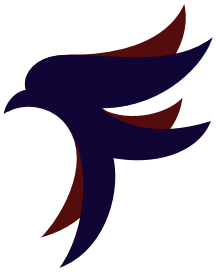

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