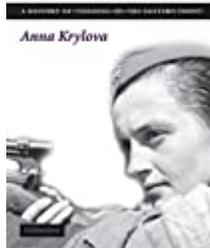




Anna Krylova. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 336 S. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-19734-2.

Soviet Women in Combat



Reviewed by Franziska Exeler

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (December, 2010)

A. Krylova: Soviet Women in Combat

During World War II, an estimated 820.000 women served in the Soviet forces. While many of them were officially noncombatants such as medics, radio operators, or truck drivers, a substantial though smaller part fought as snipers, combat pilots, or junior commanding officers. It is the history of these roughly 120.000 Soviet female combatants that Anna Krylova explores in her book “Soviet Women in Combat. A History of Violence on the Eastern Front”. In doing so, she sheds light on an unprecedented, yet largely ignored historical phenomenon: the employment of female combatants in a modern mass army. Although access to the former Soviet military archives is still highly restricted, the variety of sources that she draws on (ranging from Soviet archival documents, newspapers, literature, and films to memoirs and interview collections) is impressive. Her study, if not always easily accessible to someone not well versed in gender and discourse theory, certainly constitutes an important contribution not just to Soviet history, but also to gender and military history as such.

Anna Krylova argues that in order to understand the cultural making of female combatants, we need to

broaden our “working theoretical expectations of gender beyond the analytical convention that casts it as an *oppositional binary concept*” (p. 12). The young women who came of age in the 1930s and volunteered to fight at the front in 1941 did not understand themselves as women enacting male roles. Rather, they understood their combat action as an expression of their new liberated Soviet womanhood. For them, “womanhood” and “soldierhood” were perfectly compatible notions. Dismissing the conventional idea that ascribed merely a supportive role to women in wartime as “bourgeois”, they built up their identities as combatants “by using a *nonoppositional though still binary* concept of gender” (p. 13).

The book is structured in three parts: “Before the Front, 1930s” (part I), “On the Way to the Front, 1941-45” (part II), and “At the Front, 1941-45” (part III). In part I, Anna Krylova traces the ambiguous 1930s Soviet discourse on gender and the military that enabled young women to think of themselves as future combatants. In a country obsessed with the prospect of war, young men and women alike participated in paramilitary training. A clear policy on women’s future combat participation

never existed, and correspondingly the Soviet media put out several conflicting visions, ranging from the mother at home to the female pilot or machine gunner at the front. When Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union it was therefore only logical that tens of thousands of young women volunteered to fight.

Part II explores the issue of female mobilization into the Red Army during the war. Throughout 1941, the Soviet leadership neither encouraged women to volunteer nor did it officially prohibit women to enter the army as combatants. In practice, the decision on women's service was left to local male military officials. It was only in early 1942 that Moscow decided to begin with the official mobilization of women. While roughly 500,000 women were drafted to replace men in noncombat positions, tens of thousands of women were simultaneously trained as highly specialized combatants for mixed and all-women units. Sheer manpower shortages, Krylova argues, cannot explain this radical step. Yes, throughout the war years, the Soviet press kept silent on the official mobilization of women. Nevertheless, the shortages served as a catalyst that pushed the Soviet government to experiment with conventional notions of soldierhood/womanhood, which in turn created novel gendered spaces within the army.

It is these new combat spaces that Anna Krylova turns to in part III. Throughout the war, the presence of female combatants led to heated discussions in the Red Army. However, male responses, varying from rejection to acceptance, were not static. Rather, men and women alike turned the Soviet trenches into a space where new ways of thinking about gender were probed and appropriate gender behavior was questioned. As a result, the highly skilled female combatant became conceivable and feasible not just for the Soviet government, but also for male soldiers at the front. Functional social relations as combatants emerged between men and women, and female combat soldiers felt accepted as comrade-in-arms.

One of the great strengths of Anna Krylova's study lies in her meticulous analysis of the different and often contradictory ideas of the role of women in wartime. Her work thus critically contributes to a growing number of studies that have stressed inconsistency rather than coherency as one defining feature of Soviet policy. By arguing that the Soviet leadership never made an effort to resolve these ambiguities, she convincingly challenges the prevailing scholarly view that the gender discourse of the 1930s was characterized by a clear turn away from the previous radical gender experimen-

tations to neo-traditional, that is oppositional and hierarchical, notions of gender. In particular her reading of the female combatants' efforts to look feminine/pretty not as a return of conventional female values into the male trenches, but as an attempt to change the very meaning of the feminine is certainly thought-provoking. I found the subtitle of the book, "A History of Violence on the Eastern Front", however, misleading, as the study is really not much concerned with the different forms of violence that the soldiers were subjected to at the front, both in the fight with the Germans and within the army itself.

As Anna Krylova notes in her book, the female combatants describe their combat service in their postwar recollections as a meaning-carrying event. Their overall positive narrative, however, differs significantly from the way in which less trained forces remember the war. In a similar vein, while female combatants acknowledged the presence of sexual abuse and violence in the Red Army, these things supposedly only happened to non-combat female soldiers such as medics or radio operators. As for themselves, actual sexuality did not exist, only romantic friendship. Anna Krylova chose not to contest this "stubborn, bordering on monolithic, narrative" (p. 283) which I found quite surprising. In my interpretation, sexual assaults did not just happen to individual female soldiers. Rather, the vulnerability of women to sexual abuse constituted a structural problem within the Red Army. In the majority of cases, the (noncombat) female soldiers served in overwhelmingly male units, which entailed that they always needed a high-ranking protector. As a result, a woman often had to give her body to one man so as to ensure that others would not dare assault her. After the war, many former women soldiers were stigmatized as whores by men and other women alike. See for instance the interview with Sofia K-ich in: Svetlana Alexijewitsch, *Der Krieg hat kein weibliches Gesicht*, Berlin 2004, p. 254; also an anonymous female soldier, quoted in: Mascha+Nina+Katjuscha. *Frauen in der Roten Armee 1941-1945*, herausgegeben vom Deutsch-Russischen Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, Berlin 2003, p. 160. For recollections of male soldiers see: Sergei Poliakov, *Zapiski malenâkogo soldata o bolâshoi voine*, in: Sever 9 (1995), pp. 108-126; N. Posylaev quoted in: Elena Seniavskaja, *Chelovek na voine. Istoriko-psikhologicheskie ocherki*, Moscow 1997, p. 93; Antony Beevor / Luba Vinogradova (eds.), *A Writer at War*. Vasily Grossman with the Red Army 1941-1945, London 2005, pp. 74, 120. For the case of a woman sniper who was sexually harassed by her commander see: Iuliia Zhukova, *Devushka so sniperskoi vintovkoi. Vospominaniia vypusknitsy tsen-*

tralanoi zhenskoi shkoly sniperskoi podgotovki 1944-1945, Moscow 2006, pp. 158-159. On the post-war whore stigma see various interviews in Alexijewitsch 2004, pp. 29, 256, 267, 341, also Zhukova p. 172. In my opinion, sexuality thus mattered tremendously since it defined the gender order within the Red Army, since it was interwoven into the ways in which men and women encountered each other. If one follows this argument, however, then the question inevitably arises if this gender order did not influence the relations between male and female combatants and if not, then why? Why does there seem to be such a stark contrast between the ways in which female noncombatants and female combatants remember their service in the army? And to what extent is it a question

of the sources and of the time they were published and the audience they were directed at?

In particular in light of the fact that Anna Krylova understands her research as a contribution to the study of Soviet subjectivity, I would have found a deeper examination of these questions fascinating. In this respect, the history of not just the Soviet women combatants, but the history of all women who served in the Red Army, combat and noncombat alike, still remains to be written. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the tremendous importance of Anna Krylova's study and its significant contribution to the history of the Soviet Union as well as to gender and military history as such.

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Citation: Franziska Exeler. Review of Krylova, Anna, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.

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