Twentieth Century Women Across Cultures

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War is dispassionate in choosing its victims. It causes all participants, voluntary or involuntary, to suffer. And yet, throughout history, women have been defined by many social studies curricula as noncombatants, unable to wield a weapon against their enemy despite remaining on the receiving end of the opposition's weapon. Women in twentieth century warfare instead contribute to the war effort from the homefront, taking the positions typically held by men who had left for the warfront. However, war is by nature chaotic and often has little respect for the socially manufactured lines of home and war fronts, potentially blurring the physical gap between the two. This is certainly the case on the eastern front of World War II for the Soviet Union. As Germany advanced far into Soviet territory in 1941, the warfront was pushed ever closer to the heart of Soviet noncombatants' homes. These civilians, both men and women, became motivated to fight to reclaim their homes, supported by the national ideal that all Soviet citizens must be willing to fight and die for their motherland. One woman in particular, Lyudmila Pavlichenko, became the embodiment of this ideal, and her career "exemplified the activism fostered in young women" of the time.[123] Through her memoir *Lady Death*, Pavlichenko details the proximity the war had with the typical Soviet citizen as hometowns were transformed into battlefields. This blend of home and war fronts is a foreign concept for the United States however, emphasized throughout Lyudmila's reflection on her time spent in the western nation in 1942 as she drew comparisons between Soviet and American women. Therefore, Lyudmila Pavlichenko's story may be used in history classrooms as a case study to allow students to explore the roles of women in World War II as well as note the differences between

[123] Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 204.

Soviet and American cultures in an era directly preceding the Cold War.

Female soldiers were not unheard of in the Soviet Union by 1941. In Soviet mythology and history, women were often portrayed as "being physically strong and capable of fighting."[124] Prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917, approximately 6,000 women were enlisted as soldiers in the Russian military. During the civil war following the Revolution, somewhere between, "73,000 and 80,000 women served on the Bolshevik side."[125] After the Russian Civil War's conclusion, the Constitution of 1918 established voluntary military service for women. Soviet women were given equal rights to men in Article 122 of the 1936 Constitution. Of particular note is Article 133 of the same constitution, in which it is stated that, "The defense of the fatherland is the sacred duty of every citizen of the USSR."[126] These two Articles, when considered together, created a sense of military duty for every Soviet citizen, regardless of gender. This is evident in the feelings of many Soviet women as they remembered their enlistment, such as Svetlana Katykhina who recalls that, "My father was the first to leave for the front. Mama wanted to go with my father, she was a nurse, but he was sent in one direction, she in another. I kept going to the recruitment office, and after a year they took me."[127] Each member of Svetlana's family enlisted in the Soviet military, including both Svetlana's mother and Svetlana herself. Pavlichenko herself echoes this call to arms, stating that, "everyone who was confident in military knowledge and skills, regardless of his or her sex or national affiliation, had to join the ranks and make whatever contribution they were capable of to wipe out the German Fascist invaders."[128] Soviet citizens were united against Germany through their national sense of duty to military participation in conjunction with their united hatred for the aggressors invading their home.

Alongside legal support offered to Soviet women prior to the war, it was not abnormal for Soviet women to learn to work with firearms as citizens. In 1918, the *Vsevobuch* was created, requiring all male citizens between the ages of 18 to 40 to complete eight weeks of military training. This training was also offered to women,

[124] Reina Pennington, "Offensive Women: Women in Combat in the Red Army in the Second World War," in Journal of Military History (2010), 778.

[125] Ibid., 779.

[126] Ibid., 779.

[127] Svetlana Aleksievich. *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2001), 58.

[128] L͡iudmyla Mykhaĭlivna Pavlychenko. *Lady Death: The Memoirs of Stalin's Sniper*, (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Read How You Want, 2021), 133.

although participation was voluntary.[129] Lyudmila's first experience with shooting occurred far prior to the war through a shooting club offered to workers at Lyudmila's factory, where her "enthusiasm for rifle-shooting began, [alongside her] apprenticeship as a sharpshooter."[130] Lyudmila then pursued her hobby in the form of a two-year-long curriculum at Osoaviakhim sniper school from 1937 to 1939. Lyudmila did this not explicitly out of her own interest in sniping, however, but because the activity of Germany in Europe in the late 30s that led Lyudmila to believe her sniper skills, "might come in handy."[131] Lyudmila was a rare case in the sense that her intention of fighting in the Red Army as a sniper existed prior to the war encroaching upon the Soviet Union's territory.

Upon Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, only about 1,000 women were active in the Soviet military.[132] The battlefield quickly reached Soviet citizens' doorstep, forcing families that were able to evacuate east. Olga Vasilyevna, an eventual Soviet soldier, recalled that her "war began with evacuation… I left my home, my youth. On the way, our train was strafed, bombed."[133] It was at this point that the lines between war and homefront began to blur for Soviet citizens, causing both men and women alike to enlist in the Red Army. In the first few weeks, tens of thousands of Soviet women volunteered. Most were rejected.[134] Lyudmila Pavlichenko, despite graduating with top marks from the Osoaviakhim sniper school, was initially rejected, recalling that the military registrar, "looked at me with a harassed expression and said: 'Medical staff will be enlisted from tomorrow.'"[135] It is this initial rejection of female soldier applicants in the Soviet Union that displays that women's enlistment in the Red Army did not stem solely from Soviet social leniency towards women on the frontlines, as Soviet culture–like most nations in the mid-twentieth century–viewed women as a means of support during wartime. As the war progressed, however, "female volunteers were increasingly accepted."[136] On the second day of war, a request was made for 40,000 women to be called up for medical duties. By August of 1941, another 14,000 women were recruited as drivers. This trend continued until 1943, wherein,

> Soviet women had been integrated into all services and all military roles, ranging from traditional support roles

[129] Pennington, *Offensive Women*, 779.

[130] Pavlychenko, *Lady Death*, 32.

[131] Ibid., 38.

[132] Pennington, *Offensive Women*, 780.

[133] Aleksievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, 92.

[134] Pennington, *Offensive Women*, 780.

[135] Pavlychenko, *Lady Death*, 54.

[136] Pennington, *Offensive Women*, 780.

> like medical service, to primarily defensive work in antiaircraft defense, to offensive combat roles in the infantry, to artillery, and armor, as well as the partisan movement.[137]

While Soviet women had to begin their fight in the war prior to reaching the battlefield by gaining a foothold into the army, they quickly emerged victorious as the Red Army sought out additional manpower.

Lyudmila Pavlichenko and other Soviet women snipers were able to prove themselves effective on the battlefield. Women began to gain more respect in the eyes of Soviet military commanders. Pavlichenko's sniping instructor, Alexander Vladimirovich Potapov, told Lyudmila that, "he was sure that women – not all, of course – were better suited to sniper operations… [women] had a considered and careful approach to the process of firing."[138] Soviet Major General Morozov stated that superior female marksmanship was due to their enhanced sense of touch allowing for the smooth pulling of a trigger, insinuating that, "innate feminine characteristics… predisposed women to surgical killing."[139] The Soviet government, recognizing women's aptitude for the sniper role in combat, began training female snipers on the front lines.[140] Early Soviet media reports on female soldiers often masculinized names to hide female involvement.[141] However, this shifted as the war went on, as in March 1942 the Russian tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published the sentiment, "If a young Soviet woman patriot is burning to master the machine gun, we should give her the opportunity to realize her dream."[142] Lyudmila's experience echoed these social changes. After struggling to gain even a rifle with which to prove herself,[143] Lyudmila was able to quickly rise up in rank after proving her abilities. She was promoted from private to corporal after recovering from shrapnel wounds[144] and was later given her own sniper platoon to select and instruct in late 1941.[145] While she continuously faced many fellow Soviets who doubted her abilities as a soldier due to her gender, she encountered just as many who recognized her talents. Pavlichenko returned from the

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[137] Ibid., 782.

[138] Pavlychenko, *Lady Death*, 42.

[139] Markwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 211.

[140] Ibid., 209.

[141] Richard R. Muller and Amy Goodpaster Strebe, "Flying for Her Country: The American and Soviet Women Pilots of World War II," in *Journal of American Studies* 43, (2009).

[142] Markwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 211.

[143] Pavlychenko, *Lady Death*, 58.

[144] Ibid., 78.

[145] Ibid., 107.

frontlines in 1942 after having killed over 309 enemy soldiers.[146]

Lyudmila, after being injured for her fourth time in 1942, was taken away from the frontlines and sent to the USSR's western allies to pressure political leaders into opening up a second front against Germany. Lyudmila begins her journey in the United States, where she is subject to the drastic cultural shift between Soviet and American values during a time of war. Lyudmila is interviewed repeatedly, and she finds herself growing increasingly aggravated at the sense of calm and the focus on pointless subjects rampant within the U.S. In one press conference, Lyudmila is asked if women were, "able to use lipstick when at war," to which Lyudmila replied, "Yes, but they don't always have time. You need to be able to reach for a machine gun, or a rifle, or a pistol, or a grenade."[147] In the United States, says Lyudmila,

> I feel like the butt of jokes, the object of idle curiosity, something like a circus act. Like a bearded woman. But I'm an officer of the Red Army. I have fought and will go on fighting for the freedom and independence of my country.[148]

For a society so distanced from the forefront of war, the United States' culture viewed Lyudmila as an individual from another world, an object needing pity due to the "need" of Soviet Russia to employ their women–who, from the American perspective, should be distanced from conflict–as frontline soldiers.

During her trip to America, Lyudmila came into contact with feminist world leader Eleanor Roosevelt. When meeting with Lyudmila over breakfast, Eleanor noted that, "If you had a good view of the faces of your enemies through telescope sights, but still fired to kill, it would be hard for American women to understand you, dear Lyudmila."[149] Lyudmila responded that the difference between American and Soviet women stems not from their ability and willingness to kill, but from the difference between American and Soviet circumstances in the war. Lyudmila,

> explained to those living in a state far from the struggle against Fascism that we had come from a place where bombs were destroying towns

[146] Markwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 203.

[147] Pavlychenko, *Lady Death*, 305.

[148] Ibid., 340.

[149] Ibid., 302.

> and villages, blood was being spilt, where innocent people were being killed, and my native land was undergoing a severe ordeal. An accurate bullet was no more than a response to a vicious enemy.[150]

Soldiers fought in World War II from both the U.S. and the USSR. However, while Soviet women were given rifles and machine guns to defend their homes from the frontline, "uniformed women from the United States did not participate in organized combat."[151] So what was the difference between Soviet and American women in the mid-twentieth century? How were Soviet women capable of pulling the trigger of a rifle pointed at their enemy, while American women–or rather their media representation–remained preoccupied with the attractiveness of their uniform? The gap between American and Soviet female participation in the military did not stem from cultural nor biological differences, but from the circumstances of the war itself. While the United States remained free of foreign invaders or bombings, the Soviet Union was subject to constant pressures, bombing runs, and gunfire. In the United States, women who desired to participate on the frontline of World War II had to travel thousands of miles to the medical tents.[152] For women in the Soviet Union, the frontline came to them.

These conclusions can be applied in a (likely high school-level) history classroom to lead students to think more about the cultural gap between Soviets and Americans prior to the decades-long Cold War. Rarely are personal interactions between the two superpowers brought into the classroom, and equally rare is a case study portraying women as strong and deadly representatives of their nation on the frontline in times of war. Lyudmila Pavlichenko's story brings both of these seldom-discussed aspects of history together, creating a perfect case study to use as a medium to bring historical context and personal perspectives from the mid twentieth century into the modern classroom. Students may be encouraged to use Lyudmila's story as a source for a research paper or the excerpts about Lyudmila's visit to the US as a basis for a student-led project. With the American curriculum often restricted to a western-based perspective on World War II and the Cold War, Lyudmila Pavlichenko's memoir allows for a drastic change in perspective

[150] Ibid., 302.

[151] Barret Litoff Judy and David C. Smith, "American Women in a World at War," in *Magazine of History* 16, no. 3 (2002).

[152] Ibid.

and representation of the "enemy's" culture in contrast to our own.

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History Book Club with Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria*

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History classes are often labeled as boring and repetitive by students. This begs the question of how to engage students to quell this historical boredom. Educational theory suggests students become more involved the more they are engaged and care about what they are learning. That being said, to engage students, I suggest History teachers can implement a history book club that allows students to pick books that they want to read and can relate to history.

In this article, I will suggest using Kapka Kassabova's book *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* to be included in the proposed history book club as an example of a book that both captures the interest of students and serve as a link to learning about a country like Bulgaria which is rich with natural resources and long history. The culture and history of Bulgaria can be encapsulated through Kassabova's writing is