Introduction: ‘so similar in the main thing – the desire to fight’¹

The news about the German invasion of Soviet borders on 22 June 1941 found a Muscovite teenager Marina Chechneva in Yalta. Finding it difficult to return immediately to Moscow, she went to the local military recruitment committee: ‘I walked in’, remembered Chechneva years later in her autobiographical novel, *The Sky Remains Ours*, ‘and said that I am a pilot and want to go to the front’.²

On 22 June 1941, another teenager in a distant Siberian town, Valentina Chudaeva celebrated her high-school graduation by cruising the Ob River with her friends. In a post-war interview, she described her and her girlfriends’ thoughts when they learned about the war: ‘It seemed to us that the war was not a war without us, that we also must fight. We wanted them to give us arms. So we ran to the military recruitment committee’.³

Another young female worker in the Far East, Aleksandra Boiko added her voice to women’s memories about the outbreak of war in 1941: ‘I and my husband lived in the Far East, in Magadan. He worked as a driver, I – as a controller. When the war just started, both of us volunteered to the front’.⁴

That summer and autumn, thousands of young women reacted and acted in the same way as Chechneva, Chudaeva and Boiko. They went to their local military recruitment committees, to local Young Communist League cells and to local party organisations expecting and asking to be granted the right to fight. By early October 1941, the Soviet government
announced voluntary female mobilisation into the field army. Over the course of the war, 800,000 young women were sent to the front.

Unique in modern history, this female mass imposition on the sacred and exclusively male prerogative to modern warfare and trained violence on the one hand, and to equally sacred and traditionally male rights to kill and to die heroically, on the other hand, has remained outside scholarly attention. Having enjoyed a long history in women’s and gender studies, the issue of women, gender and warfare has been, so far, explored up to the combat line through women’s work at the home front and through their auxiliary roles in Western armies in the two world wars.⁵

To begin a scholarly engagement with Soviet women’s unprecedented entrance into combat, I pursue three questions in this article. How did this women’s entitlement to fighting become thinkable, acceptable and realisable?

Within the limits of contemporary gender scholarship in Soviet studies, these questions run the risk of being neither posed nor answered. The established interpretive paradigm of Soviet studies about Soviet women and the 1930s state-sponsored gender-equality project argues against major qualitative changes in Soviet conceptions of traditional gender differences, and rests on two premises. First, in relation to the social and economic terrain of Stalinist Russia, it acknowledges major ‘transformations’ in women’s obligations, roles and opportunities. Second, in the realm of Stalinist political culture it stresses the resurgence of ‘traditional’ gender norms or treats the official gender-equality discourse of the 1930s as ‘empty rhetoric’.⁶

The tendency to interpret women’s transformed social and economic lives in the light of conservative reversals and devaluations of official commitment to gender equality continues to influence the field of Soviet gender studies. In the most recent contribution to the 1930s social history of women, Thomas G. Schrand, for example, argues that the dominant position of men in 1930s Soviet society remained unthreatened, while women’s emancipation – the state’s promise of gender equality – remained ‘incomplete’ as women preserved their traditional subordinate position in the Soviet family and work place.⁷ In the evolving field of cultural and gender history, Karen Petrone analyses the work of gender in Soviet war and heroic narratives. She also comes to similar conclusions and argues that ‘while both men and women embraced the new roles and egalitarian gender ideals’, the public image of a male military hero ‘undermined the revolutionary rhetoric of gender equality in the Soviet Union’.⁸

This unchallenged interpretive paradigm allows scholars to discount the work of gender-equality discourse in Stalinist society and to overlook
the presence of radical challenges and alternatives to traditional conceptions of gender norms in official political culture or in the individual lives of men and women. Interpreting social and economic transformations, scholars tend to privilege the conservative and traditional elements of 1930s gender politics and to superimpose them on the totality of Stalinist social and cultural gender realities. In her article cited above, Petrone’s argument, for example, captures the established pattern of interpretation when it moves from acknowledging new gender roles to cancelling them out without examining them. This interpretive move does not allow for an investigation of a full spectrum of gender notions in Soviet official culture. Scholars of Soviet women’s history often reduce diverse and contradictory dimensions of Stalinist official narrative to one of its expressions and overlook the generation-based multidimensionality of Stalinist official message. Such an interpretive treatment is intrinsically dependent on a conception of the Stalinist cultural realm as uniform, monolithic and deprived of contradictions.9

In my approach to Stalinist political culture I try to avoid the temptation to discount the official gender-equality discourse and its impact on Stalinist social policies and individual self-perceptions of men and women. I also avoid privileging the radical stream in official gender ideology. The challenge here is not to focus on one or the other dimension of Stalinist culture in isolation from cultural, social and generational developments, but to understand the relationship between conservative and radical gender norms in Stalinist official discourse and social practice. One of the ways to do this is to recognise the fragmented nature of Stalinist discourse targeted at different generations of Soviet men and women.

I argue that the established paradigm is incomplete. It deprives Stalinist gender notions and relations of the 1930s of their complexity. It makes the woman-fighter phenomenon – Soviet women’s imagined and acted out military personalities – inexplicable and invisible.

Contrary to the dominant paradigm, I argue that the conceivability of women’s compatibility with combat, war and violence was a product of the radical undoing of traditional gender differences that Stalinist society underwent in the 1930s. By the late 1930s, the construction of alternative gender personalities enjoyed both public articulation in press and military expert approval. The alternative femininity encompassed and redefined the traditionally incompatible qualities: maternal love and military violence, feminine charm and military discipline, military excellence, professionalism, physical endurance, courage. This new alternative was a product of a collective and uncoordinated effort of journalists, women participants in defence mobilisation campaigns, party leaders and military experts. It shaded conventional gender differences by presenting more sharing and overlapping notions of male and female being.

More than an abstract conceptualisation, the new vision of femininity enjoyed a particular generational profile and had live role models. In press and literature, the alternative woman was a young woman born around 1910. The Stalinist political culture was thus not only not thematically monolithic but also differentiated in relation to different generations and social groups. By the late 1930s, young women also acquired live idols – a small cohort of women military pilots in the Red Army. Omitted from academic historical narratives, they redefined the traditional notions of maternal obligations and were the first live embodiments of women’s compatibility with modern warfare, violence and redefined motherhood. Serving in the army as career officers in time of peace, they were also key advocates of women’s right to participate in combat in time of war. Allowed to articulate their views in central party press, women officers made combat participation a publicly stated woman’s option intended for young women. Thus, the ultimate expansion of women’s social space for self-realisation took place in Stalinist Russia.

I will start my investigation with an analysis of the work of gender in Stalinist representations of war and in mass mobilisation campaigns of the 1930s. From the space of Soviet press and literature, I will derive an image of a militarised young woman presented by journalists and writers as capable of using rifles and flying planes as well as her male contemporaries. I will discuss the psychological difficulties of directly articulating in the Soviet press the woman’s right to war and violence. The journalistic suggestion of male and female equal military excellence did not automatically translate into the next logical step – granting young women the right to fight. I trace the transition from a public discourse that implied women’s compatibility with military action to a discourse that directly stated women’s option to fight through Soviet press, literature, young women’s letters to the Soviet press and their autobiographical sketches and novels. The lives of women military pilots will constitute the last site of my analysis of the rise of Soviet militarised and professionally violent women.

A note on sources is due here. A significant portion of articles, novels and autobiographical sketches used in the article were published in the 1930s. Their very presence in the official public realm of the 1930s and implicit official approval are of crucial importance for the agenda pursued in the article. I treat my sources as different aspects of Stalinist official culture, and it is through them that I trace the gradual articulation and recognition of the radical vision of Soviet femininity in Stalinist culture. Thus, I am more concerned here with the unprecedented radicalism of the gender-bending statement and individual women’s lives that were given space in the Stalinist print medium than with the views and facts that were silenced or censored.

‘When the war comes’: Soviet youth and defence mobilisation campaigns of the 1930s

Women’s mass voluntary conscription into the army in 1941 was a product of a new turn taken by party- and state-sponsored gender-equality projects in the 1930s in relation to approaching war. Throughout the decade, state and party leaders, Soviet journalists, popular writers and military experts persistently wove war into the public imagination of the immediate future. Preparations for the ‘future war’ informed a party-sponsored avalanche of war-mobilisation campaigns that included the military training of millions of Soviet civilians, both men and women. It is at the conjunction of defence mobilisation campaigns, Stalinist war imagination and official gender-equality discourse that the promise of women’s equality, the keystone of the original Bolshevik feminist message, expanded from the realms of labour, education and politics towards the sphere of war and combat.

In 1930s Soviet political culture, the future war had several staple characteristics: it was inevitable and had a particular generation and gender profile. Portrayed as ‘inevitable’ ever since the foundation of the Soviet state, the future war in the 1930s acquired crucial clarification in print media. Reacting to the changing world situation, Soviet leaders, journalists and party-minded writers began to feature the war as approaching rapidly and provided it with possible dates that situated the war within the decade of the 1930s. In the first widely promoted and reviewed novel about the future war, Petr Pavlenko’s *In the East*, published in 1936, the author situated the beginning of the world conflict in the late 1930s. Reviewing the novel, *Pravda*, the main newspaper of the Communist Party, went even further and reduced the distance to the future confrontation to between ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’. By the mid-1930s, journalists writing for party press, song writers and film-makers repeatedly turned to the ‘war question’ – ‘one of the sharpest questions of the present’, to cite a *Pravda* reviewer of *In the East*. Through various media, they demanded from their readers, listeners and viewers a constant ‘mobilised readiness’ for the war, if, according to a popular song of the period, it ‘starts tomorrow’.10

In the war discourse of the 1930s, the future war had specific contours. Party leaders, journalists and military commentators identified Germany and Japan as the Soviet Union’s most likely immediate enemies. The two countries figured in Soviet press and Party discourse as ‘breeding grounds of military threat’ – one of I. V. Stalin’s popular euphemisms in the mid-1930s.11

In the case of Japan, *Pravda* journalists presented the Soviet-Japanese border as a continuing conflict, though on a small scale. The *Pravda*
reporting oscillated between sudden Japanese attacks on the Soviet border and illegal border crossings by Japanese saboteurs. The idea of chronic small-scale military emergencies was captured in contemporary plays and films. On the prewar Soviet stage, for example, military characters constituted a common background against which events in peaceful Soviet life took place. Officers’ roles consisted of their unexpected disappearances and appearances. Short-lived military incidents efficiently taken care of by Soviet military personnel were never presented as final resolutions. Konstantin Simonov, a young and popular poet, playwright and writer, captured this idea in his prewar play, *A Guy from our Town*, in which the destruction of the enemy on the Soviet-Japanese border was presented as a prelude to the big war. ‘I self-consciously’, wrote Simonov in his memoirs, ‘did not end the play with an apotheosis’ but with a suggestion that more battles were to come.\(^\text{12}\)

In summer of 1938, the Soviet press and radio covered the first large-scale operation in the Far East. Undertaken by the Red Army against the Japanese troops that crossed the Soviet border on 29 July, this nearly two-week military affair, west of Lake Khasan, involved a mass deployment of troops, artillery, tanks and aircraft. The Khasan incident brought a victory to the Red Army that forced the enemy off the Soviet territory.

A crucial dimension of the Stalinist vision of the future war was the war’s generational profile. Though calling upon the whole population to be constantly mobilised for the war, party officials, journalists and writers assigned different roles to different generational groups. Fighting in the future military conflict belonged to the young generation of the Soviet state. Roughly identified by journalists as born after 1910, the young people, also referred to as ‘Soviet youth’ or ‘young Soviet people’, had not participated in the Revolution or the Civil War. They were designated as the primary fighters in the upcoming conflict. The All-Union Young Communist League (the Komsomol), a Party-sponsored youth organisation dedicated to the Communist upbringing of the young generation, acted as the main intermediary between the Party and the young people. Writing in their central newspaper *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, Komsomol leaders captured the general agreement of youth’s special relationship to the war when they repeatedly presented the future conflict as youth’s great historical test, equivalent to the one their parents had already passed in preceding battles. In the course of the 1930s, the task of bringing up young Communists increasingly became tantamount to the task to raising ‘fighters’.\(^\text{13}\)

The Komsomol’s close partner was another mass organisation – the Society for Promotion of Defence, Aviation, and Chemical Development (OSOVIAKHIM). Formed in 1927, the Society claimed 11 million members already in 1931. Heavily funded by the state, OSOVIAKHIM

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offered to youth a vast and growing network of shooting galleries, flying clubs, parachute-stands and airfields where youth could add practical military skills to their designated war duties. By the end of the 1930s, the shooting facilities under the OSOVIAKHIM umbrella produced 1.7 million riflemen and riflewomen marked by Rifleman Badges for passing All Union shooting standards. At least twice as many men and women were trained to shoot, but did not take a formal examination. In 1935, the Society had at its disposal 122 Flying Clubs and more than 1,000 parachute stands around which skydiving circles were organised. Starting with the middle 1930s, the Komsomol and the OSOVIAKHIM together reported thousands of young people participating in clubs and circles and taking advantage of skydiving and flying facilities. According to the Komsomol data, in 1935, 800,000 people jumped off parachute stands, 3,500 people graduated from flying clubs and became certified pilots; in the first half of 1936, 10,500 people jumped out of planes.\footnote{14}

Throughout the 1930s, the Komsomol organisation and OSOVIAKHIM generated a war-threat mentality and helped to channel it through a sequence of mobilisation campaigns that punctuated the decade. The All Union Young Communist Sniper Campaign was one of the first mass mobilisations initiated and propagated by Komsomol leadership and 
\textit{Komsomol'skaia Pravda} in 1932. It was shortly followed by the All Union Sky-Diving Campaign, by the All Union ‘Komsomol Member, Learn the Plane’ Campaign, and by the All Union Machinegun initiative. Finally, in 1938, the Komsomol addressed its members with a new defence agenda – to master a military profession parallel to one’s civilian occupation. Along with All Union mass-mobilisation campaigns, the Komsomol and the OSOVIAKHIM also provided funds and facilities for smaller-scale initiatives such as tank and military vehicle driving, military mechanic training, and, as a tribute to the Civil War, horseback riding.\footnote{15}

Once initiated, the campaigns did not discontinue and lasted for the rest of the decade parallel to each other. By the middle 1930s, the sniper, skydiving and flying movements were all in full gear and received further incentives and new numeric goals from A. V. Kosarev, the leader of the Communist Youth League, in his report at the 1936 All Union Komsomol Congress. Summing up the Komsomol’s achievements in its mission to turn each Komsomol member into a fighter, Kosarev called for the expansion of all defence initiatives of the Komsomol. ‘The young Soviet people’, according to Kosarev, were now to strive to become both skydivers and pilots; never to forget their rifle and, ‘most importantly, not to forget to learn how to use it’. On behalf of the League, he pledged that the OSOVIAKHIM flying-club system would produce 8,000 pilots over the course of 1936.\footnote{16}
The Soviet youth mobilisation campaigns of the 1930s indiscriminately included both men and women. Explicitly including young women into civilian military training, the Stalinist war discourse in the early and mid-1930s also implicitly included young women in combat in the future war as well as into career pursuits in the Red Army. The form of address used by Komsomol and Party leaders and journalists in their public campaigning such as ‘youth’, ‘young people’ and ‘Komsomol members’ – collective and gender neutral terms in the Russian language – captured the gender neutrality of the 1930s defence effort. The gender neutrality was further accentuated by the consistent failure on the part of party and Komsomol organisers to introduce a clearly stated gender division of defence obligations in the mobilisation effort and the future war.

In 1932, Komsomol’skaia Pravda called upon the ‘masses of Komsomol members’, without specifying their gender, to ‘know the rifle like ABC’. The newspaper’s photojournalists clarified the meaning of ‘masses’ by unapologetically including young women into Komsomol’skaia Pravda’s numerous picture galleries that documented the sniper movement. Photos of the best male and female snipers, dressed in military uniforms and with rifles hanging over their shoulders, demonstrated young men and women’s equal ability in military skill and invited the readers to identify with either face of military excellence. Nor did journalists refrain from featuring single militarised young women who, by the mid-1930s, began to win first prizes at local, regional and All Union shooting competitions. Solo photographs of young women-snipers moved to the front page of Komsomol’skaia Pravda to represent the best military achievements of Soviet youth as a whole. One such female sniper-champion was Vera Stafinskaia, a teenager from Ivanovo, who in 1937 showed the best results at the Second All Union Competition of Teenage Snipers: out of fifty possible shots, she achieved forty-four in a standing position, forty-eight shooting from a kneeling position, and fifty shooting while lying down. Captured by a photographer with her rifle over her shoulder, Vera embodied an active, excelling and militarised young woman offered for admiration and imitation for both men and women.

This mode of coverage informed the rest of the decade’s war mobilisation. Komsomol’skaia Pravda continued to mix female and male pilots, skydivers, military mechanics, tank-drivers and machine-gunners in its representation of the All Union campaigns. Along with a non-discriminating inclusion into the defence effort and an equally non-discriminating celebration of military prowess, young militarised women in the Soviet press became implicitly connected to the defence effort’s ultimate goals – preparation for service in the Red Army and to fight and die on the fronts of the future war. Besides appealing to the gender-neutral
‘masses’, the 1932 sniper campaign also carried an open agenda to prepare ‘hundreds and thousands of Komsomol members’ for the Red Army. A crucial addition to Kosarev’s 1936 Congress report was his clarification of reasons for Soviet youths’ need to ‘learn the rifle’ and other military skills. Including himself among the collective gender unspecified ‘we’, Kosarev, stated that, well-prepared for the war, ‘we, young Soviet people, are not afraid of dying in battle. We will not lose our composure under the enemy’s fire. Our hand will not shake and our eye will not miss in the upcoming fighting. We will fight with fervour, endurance and unparalleled valour’.19

According to propagandisers of the 1930s defence mobilisation campaigns, flying and skydiving represented the most advanced aspects of modern warfare. In numerous explanatory essays and speeches, Party and Komsomol leaders, journalists and military experts securely implanted skydiving and flying into fictional scenes of landing operations, air battles and bombing missions. In particular, piloting was designated as the decisive factor for the fortunes of a future war.20 As in the sniper campaign, women enjoyed equal access to this sphere of mobilisation. The flying and skydiving initiative, however, contained greater opportunities for women to turn their newly acquired flying and parachuting skills into permanent defence-related occupations and to connect their lives with the defence mobilisation effort. Within the OSOVIAKHIM network of parachuting circles and flying clubs, a cohort of young women, starting in the early 1930s, began to switch from their non-military occupations to newly available jobs as parachuting and flying instructors. The switch signalled a further round in the state-sponsored programme that encouraged women to enter into traditionally non-female occupations. Young women’s entrance into defence-related training jobs opened up another realm for women’s activity in Soviet prewar society, so far unexplored by scholars.

By the end of the 1930s, the OSOVIAKHIM system had a cohort of famous women flight and parachuting instructors, who had come into OSOVIAKHIM from villages, manufacturing plants and technical schools. In most cases, they were OSOVIAKHIM’s ex-students who, for some time, combined their original work and study with training in parachuting and flying clubs. In the early 1930s, Ol’ga Iamshchikova, Raia Beliaeva and Valeria Khomiakova – the best known female instructors and career pilots – followed different professional paths to flying schools. All in their late teens and early twenties, Ol’ga Iamshchikova enrolled at the Leningrad School for Aircraft Mechanics, Raia Beliaeva studied at the Leningrad Technical School for Tanners and Valeria Khomiakova continued her family’s tradition and became a chemical engineer like her father. Actively participating in the defence
mobilisation, they simultaneously volunteered to enrol into flying clubs, and within a few years, not only became certified pilots and parachutists but were employed by OSOVIAKHIM and had to part with their original occupations.

Before the war, the young women had accumulated thousands of flying hours, hundreds of parachute jumps, trained hundreds of students and were regular favourites in Komsomol’skaia Pravda. According to their and their colleagues’ and friends’ memoirs, they followed each other’s careers in newspapers and often knew about each other’s lives without meeting in person. A famous flying instructor at the Leningrad Flying Club, Ol’ga Iamshchikova logged more than 1,000 flying hours on almost every type of Soviet fighter by the late 1930s. Among her students were famous military pilots. Valeria Khomiakova was also well known within the walls of military flying schools. Not only did her former students successfully enrol into cadet schools, Khomiakova also received recognition and gratitude from military schools’ staff for preparing excellent cadres. In her instructor job, Raia Beliaeva combined both parachuting and flying. Training at the Tushino Flying Club in Moscow, the location for the most famous aerobatic demonstrations, she routinely participated in air shows.\(^\text{21}\)

However, in their coverage of either the high-profile career pilots of civilian defence societies or women volunteers learning how to use rifles, parachutes and machine guns, Soviet journalists exhibited clear limitations that informed the public war discourse until the late 1930s. On the one hand, following the 1930s mobilisation campaigns, along with Party and Komsomol leaders, they not only captured young women’s enthusiasm for military training and defence-related occupations, but also played a major role in creating public acceptance of young women in military uniforms displaying their military skills. In the Soviet press, reporting on militarised women evolved into a representation of a willing and capable young woman fighter whose military proficiency equalled that of men. Men and women represented interchangeable role models to be imitated by a gender-undifferentiated youth. Willing to assign military excellence equally to young men and women, Soviet journalists moved the Soviet discourse on gender equality into another, formerly masculine, space – civilian military training.

But on the other hand, the recognition of female military skills did not automatically translate into a resolute and open recognition of women’s right to fight as combatants. In fact, journalists and Komsomol leaders routinely, until the late 1930s, refrained from clearly articulating the militarised women’s roles in future military battles. In Party and Komsomol defence initiatives and their coverage in the press, women’s place in future combat was implied, but never directly stated. Even in the
midst of publicly granted recognition of women’s military skills and the 
continuing promotion of gender equality, to connect young Soviet 
womanhood openly with combat participation turned out to be too 
strenuous a psychological task for men involved in the defence effort 
as well as in press coverage.

The public recognition of young women’s military abilities contained 
many latent questions. What should young women do with their newly 
discovered military capabilities? Did they, along with their excellent 
military skills, also acquire the right to use them, that is, to join men in 
defence of their country and in the destruction of the enemy? These 
questions would soon be raised by young women defence activists and 
provoke a new development of Stalinist war discourse as its participants 
would move the discussion from considering the war in gender neutral 
terms to viewing it as a clear-cut two-gender affair.

‘Burning desire’ to serve: cross-gender identifications and the 
articulation of women’s military rights in young women’s writing

The first voices that publicly imagined young women in battle scenes of 
the future war belonged to members of the Soviet intelligentsia. To 
numerous famous images of male fighters, they added female characters 
and developed the implications of mobilisation campaigns and their 
coverage in Soviet press to their possible logical conclusions. Outside 
the public realm of Stalinist war discourse, there existed yet another 
space in which young women themselves evolved journalistic implications 
and artistic imagination and resolutely inserted themselves into military 
action. In their diaries, letters to editors and to Soviet military officials as 
well as in their actions, young women began not only to see themselves as 
woman fighters but also to demand the right to actualise their military 
aspirations in prewar Stalinist society. After 1936, young women’s new 
vision of themselves as fighters and career officers finally invaded public 
space when Komsomol’skaia Pravda decided to print their letters. The 
newspaper’s decision to expand the limits of public engagement with the 
‘women and war’ issue initiated a debate in which different positions 
clashed and contradictions between implications of mobilisation campaigns 
and realities of military institutions became apparent.

The first representations of women in combat in Soviet literature and 
film immediately exposed psychological grounds for Soviet journalists’ 
reluctance to expand their discussion of militarised young women to 
include military action. To admit young women’s compatibility with com-
bat warfare was to initiate a process assigning qualities indispensable for 
military situations and which were incompatible with resilient and trad-
itional notions of femininity; qualities such as cruelty, cold-bloodedness
and the trained and calculated determination to kill. The difference between a young, decorated woman sniper fixed in a static pose in a photograph and a woman fighter in action and in no need of a male defender, constituted a major departure from traditional perceptions of gender differences in Soviet Russia.

In *In the East*, Petr Pavlenko attempted to do exactly this. He chose to describe air combat in his imaginary war with Japan through the eyes of a young female pilot, Zhenia Tarasenkova. He pinpointed the implications of Party- and Komsomol-encouraged military training among young women when his heroine thanks the Party and the government for entrusting her with a military assignment and expresses her conscious awareness of the radical gender dimension of her presence in the war: ‘I am going to fight on behalf of all young women of the Soviet Union’, states Zhenia before she takes off. In his war-defining bestseller, Pavlenko went as far as to endow his female pilot with not only the qualities of a capable fighter but also with an ability to enjoy the very act of destroying the enemy. In the 1936 version of the novel, Zhenia ecstatically bombs the Japanese enemy, and it is this barely controllable urge to destroy and kill that nearly costs her her own life.22

Pavlenko’s representation of a future war as a joint venture between men and women received the highest notice available in the Stalinist society of the 1930s – two positive reviews in *Pravda*. In one of them, *Pravda* journalist L. Rovinskii devoted half a page to the novel and, following Pavlenko, included ‘young Komsomol member Zhenia Tarasenkova’, in his discussion of future ‘fighters’ in general. The journalist also inserted Zhenia’s monologue before her battle into his review. Writing within the reporting limits of the time, Rovinskii restricted his discussion of women in combat to Pavlenko’s narrative, but Zhenia’s words became disseminated amongst the millions of readers of *Pravda*.23

The first instances of introducing women into war scenes also allowed artists to consider situations of competition between sexes. Another famous image of a female fighter came from an exceptionally popular film based on the Russian Civil War and its legendary hero, Chapaev. Named after the main hero, the film *Chapaev* also featured a female soldier – machine-gun operator Anka – who masterfully and cold-bloodedly destroys the enemy. In one of the most famous scenes in *Chapaev*, Anka patiently awaits the enemy columns to approach the partisan position close enough so that she can mercilessly hit the target. During this scene of tense expectation, the camera pans round to capture the reactions of the male soldiers in Anka’s unit. Unlike Anka’s self-composed behaviour, they exhibit signs of nervous restlessness. They anxiously try to prompt her to shoot. In response, the woman machine-gunner annoyingly dismisses their advice and does not shoot until she finds the right moment.24
Outside the public space, in the personal realm of diaries and letters, young women defence activists provided evidence of major changes taking place in the youth’s perception of gender difference in response to the defence mobilisation campaigns. Writing about their learning experiences with rifles and planes, young women replicated a traditionally male relationship to war and presented their military participation in the future military conflict as their right and duty. In their minds, war action and career military training ceased being an exclusive male obligation, while fighters’ qualities figured as natural and constitutive of their Soviet womanhood.

A teenager in the mid-1930s in Moscow, Evgeniia Rudneva dedicated much space to her defence activities in the diary that she kept between 1934 and 1944. An excellent student at Moscow State University with a special interest in astronomy, Evgeniia was born in 1920, in Berdiansk. When her father, a telephone operator, found a job at one of the Moscow plants, the Rudneva family moved to the outskirts of Moscow where Evgeniia went to school. During her school and university years, she practised consistently with a rifle and machine-gun. The fact that shooting did not come easily to Evgeniia only made her more determined to master it and to prepare for future war. On 22 February 1939 she wrote about her machine-gun practice at the shooting field on the outskirts of Moscow: ‘I had to shoot with the hand machine-gun. I had to hold it in my hand and, of course, not one of twenty-five bullets hit the target, and my fascist remained alive. And that is very sad (priskorbno)’. Her following resolution to, ‘learn the machine-gun “Maksim” better and, by all means, pass the norms’ for the machine-gun badge rested on Zhenia’s self-expectation to become a soldier, to kill fascists and to ‘die for the people’s cause’ when the ‘hour comes’.25

Another Moscow teenager in the 1930s, Marina Chechneva, began to attend her district flying club at the age of sixteen. In her memoirs, she remembered two of her ‘cherished’ dreams of the time – to become a career fighter pilot and to ‘rout the enemy shoulder to shoulder with the men’ in the upcoming war. In 1938, her imagination took her to the Lake Khasan incident on the Soviet-Japanese border. She remembered complaining to her friend that she had missed the Khasan incident. Her only consolation was the military significance that she assigned to her flying classes. In her mind, Soviet aviation and the future war were intertwined, and a pilot’s profession should lead her to the front.26

Rudneva’s diary and Chechneva’s memoir are detailed documents that outline numerous possibilities offered to young women in Stalinist society to construct and fashion themselves as fighters in war and life. Rudneva and Chechneva drew on a wide range of actual and fictional military heroes from newspapers, literature and film. Their writing is a

tribute to the unfixed state of gender in Stalinist society of the 1930s, the
state that encouraged and allowed for a construction of non-conven-
tional female dreams, ideals and personalities. Evgeniia Rudneva
demonstrated her breaking away from traditional notions of gender
obligations in wartime when she identified across gender lines and
indiscriminately admired men and women for their martial qualities
and willingness to fight. Her favourite and most-mentioned role
model, who helps to articulate her readiness to ‘die for the people’s
cause’, was a male Civil War hero from Nikolai Ostrovsky’s 1936 auto-
biographical novel, How the Steel was Tempered. Written by a Civil War
invalid who was blind and paralysed, the novel was an immediate success
among Soviet youth and, by 1938, was added to the high-school litera-
ture curriculum.27

Chechneva’s most revered role model came from 1930s Soviet avi-
ation. A legend in his lifetime and a nearly constant presence in Soviet
press throughout the 1930s, Valerii Chkalov was a military test pilot.
Every year he routinely committed deeds which Soviet journalists and
party leaders defined as heroic and dedicated to Soviet defence and
mobilisation efforts. Among his main achievements heavily covered in
the Soviet press were the first non-stop flight to the Far East and the
flight over the North Pole to the United States. By the late 1930s,
Chkalov together with his crew, navigator Beliakov and air mechanic
Baidukov, topped the pyramid of defence heroes. Chechneva’s choice
was thus ambitious. ‘To be like Chkalov’ was first, her childhood ‘secret
dream’ and second, her open agenda.28

By the late 1930s, the flying club network also provided Chechneva
with a supportive female community. Established and famous, female
flying instructors constituted another self-conscious and articulate group
of active advocates for young women’s access to defence and military
occupations. Among Chechneva’s instructors was Valeria Khomiakova,
who, according to Chechneva, not only taught flying lessons but was also
a persistent and outspoken supporter of women’s equality in aviation.
To allow women to ‘uncover their talents’ was tantamount to admitting
women into all spheres of human activities.29

In 1937, the mass character of Rudneva’s and Chechneva’s self-per-
ceptions and aspirations among young women of the 1930s was revealed
for the first time. On 14 August, Komsomol’skaia Pravda reported to its
readers that the newspaper had been receiving letters from young
women who expressed their determination not only to become fighters
in the future war but also to pursue military careers, to join the army and
to ‘dedicate their whole lives’ to the defence of the country. Letters from
women were translated into a newspaper article entitled, ‘Woman
Fighter: Reviewing Readers’ Letters’. Citing women’s letters, the article

allowed young women publicly to state their intentions of entering the twin male spheres of war and professional military training. The implied inclusion of young women into military action in the future war became a straightforward discussion as women’s military plans became an open debate in Komsomol’skaia Pravda.\

The pool of letter-writers included Komsomol activists and pupils, students in pedagogical vocational schools and weavers at a Moscow factory. They closely replicated Chechneva’s ‘cherished dreams’, which the reviewer also called a ‘burning desire’ to enter military pilot schools, to enroll in cadet training and to become officers. Sixteen-year-old high school student, Mara Lineva, dreamed about a military occupation. She was a Komsomol secretary from the town of Spassk in the far east, and outlined her and her female friends’ gradual trajectory of interest, which ranged from basic defence classes in skydiving to a decision to become military pilots. The letters also pointed to a persistent deterioration of traditional visions of women as natural and instinctive mothers amongst young women in the 1930s. Determined to devote their lives to the professional defence of their country, these young women did not hesitate to express their unwillingness to become mothers by arguing that ‘they do not necessarily have to be mothers while they must be pilots and officers’. Young women’s letters uncovered two co-dependent processes in the formation of female self-perception, thus far unconsidered by the Soviet press. The identification with the right to combat and violence seemed to ask for a disavowal of motherhood as an essential need and duty.\

Thus, the transition from the gender-neutral discourse that implied women’s right to combat to the discourse that directly articulated this right started in Komsomol’skaia Pravda when, in 1937, the newspaper allotted print space to young women’s letters. It opened up not only a Pandora’s box of questions but also a discourse of potential conflict that had been successfully avoided as long as the right to use the rifle in the future war was kept within the terms of gender neutrality. The moment young Soviet women derived the vision of the specifically feminine ‘right to the rifle’ from Soviet mobilisation campaigns, and Soviet journalists publicised these visions, the magnitude of the challenge to traditional gender norms and to military institutions began to reveal itself.

Publicly voiced women’s right to combat, death and violence threatened to turn the traditional female obligation to bear children into a valid option. This development ran the risk of becoming especially problematic in the mid-1930s amongst the All Union discussion of the Anti-Abortion and Protection of Maternity Law which brought, with renewed force, notions of women’s maternal instincts to the forefront of party images of desirable womanhood.
The most immediate question that the newspaper and Komsomol leaders had to deal with was the possibility of an actual realisation of women’s ‘burning desire’ to serve in the army. Soviet military institutions in the 1930s did not permit women into military schools. The main reason for young women’s letters to Komsomol’skaia Pravda was to protest against this gender discrimination in the army’s admission policy. Komsomol member, comrade Iudina, authoritatively declared the decision not to accept women into military schools as ‘wrong’, while Komsomol members Bubenina and Rudneva, students at a pedagogical vocational school, proposed to open a ‘special military school for women’.

33 If the prospect of volunteering to fight in the future war did not have an immediate effect on young women’s lives in the 1930s, military schools closed to women had an immediate and tangible impact. The ban changed the trajectories of women’s lives and closed opportunities. This gender-based restriction was acutely felt by those women graduates of the flying clubs, who could not follow their male fellow pilots into military flight schools. Chechneva describes a sense of loss and pointlessness when she, after her graduation, had to part with her male fellow-pilots who headed for military schools.

34 The late 1930s in Soviet press and society witnessed an attempt to provide answers to these pressing questions and to reconcile glaring contradictions between conflicting notions of young womanhood and women’s rights. Key participants in the women and military debates were military men and women, together with high party officials.

The ‘charm’ and ‘mercilessness’ of Soviet women military pilots within and outside the public gaze

The presence of women in the Soviet military in the 1930s is an unknown fact in Soviet history. Public knowledge about female officers before the late 1930s was also not extensive. Until 1937–38, female officers were not the centre of public attention and figured in Soviet press only as rare photographs of women in uniforms and with short hair. Accompanying captions would give a brief summary of a defence-related accomplishment. What distinguished female officers from other militarised and uniform-wearing young women was the military insignia on their collar tabs and a military rank that stood before their names in the caption. Most female officers belonged to the Air Force. By 1937, Pravda and Komsomol’skaia Pravda had presented their readers with fighter pilots and navigators Marina Nesterenko, sisters – captain Tamara and captain Marina Kazarinova, captain Vera Lomako, captain Polina Osipenko, second lieutenant Marina Raskova, second lieutenant Klavdia Urazova and second lieutenant Nina Rusakova. Among them were squadron and
flight commanders, squadron and flight navigators who, in charge of male military pilots, participated in routine military training, missions and war games.

The very presence of women officers in the Red Army despite the general prohibition against women in the military service reveals another effect of state-sponsored feminism and the 1930s mobilisation campaign on Stalinist society. Clearly, some military men violated military rules and regulations to let young women into the army. Thanks to the ambiguity of official press and defence mobilisation, gender notions were in flux. What is more, the confusion about appropriate gender differences and the instability of gender demarcation of social roles turned out to prevail not only amongst young women and Soviet artists; both confusion and fluctuation regarding the women question also extended to male military personnel. Given the fact that, throughout the 1930s, neither Party nor Komsomol leaders came out publicly with a clear position on the military women issue, in the midst of the military establishment, men and women seized the opportunity to work out new versions of gender relationships. This process was indispensable for the creation of live examples of new Soviet masculinity and femininity, which military men and women began to share with Soviet society in the press and in their autobiographical writings after 1937. Without this unplanned and uncoordinated experiment in the military, the ultimate decision to allow eager military-minded young women to become fighters in World War II could hardly be accounted for.

The absence of a Party and Komsomol line on the women question allowed for a space of grassroots initiative where individual Party and Komsomol members together with male officers had an opportunity to decide whether or not to validate young women’s desire to join the military. In each individual case, they were to determine the meaning of the military regulations against women’s presence in the army. In the light of the gender-equality policies and women’s promotion into defence-related occupations, could the regulations be merely a surviving and unenlightened tsarist practice? According to female officers, it was individual members of Party and Komsomol organisations who opened a way into service when they helped women to enrol in military schools.

In her 1939 memoirs, From the Hoe to the Stalinist Plane, Polina Osipenko, one of the first career military pilots in the Soviet Union, tells a story about how as a twenty-two-year-old peasant girl, she travelled from her village by the Azov Sea to the Kacha Military Flying School not far from Sevastopol in 1929. She was denied admission outright by the school principal on the grounds of her insufficient education – two years of village elementary school. Osipenko’s determination to become a military pilot did not appear as incomprehensible or
unprecedented to the school principal. The school had already admitted three other women as cadets and regularly trained groups of young women as a part of the defence mobilisation campaign. Determined to get into the school, Osipenko first found a job in the school canteen. According to her memoir, she had many opportunities to watch and envy a group of women weavers in blue uniforms from the Orekhovo-Zuevo and Ivanovo mills who had their flying lessons at the school. What had inspired a village girl to want to become a pilot and an officer in the first place? Osipenko tells two stories: the first is about a plane that, due to an emergency landing at the outskirts of her village, brought into Osipenko’s life, just for a moment, a male pilot and a female passenger. This literal intrusion of Soviet aviation into Osipenko’s life prompted a gender-undifferentiated identification with the man and the woman as Osipenko began to harbour a dream to become like them. Osipenko found another source to nourish her dream in Soviet newspapers where she remembered seeing pictures of female pilots.

In 1929, using the pressure that the school party organisation was willing to put upon the school administration, Osipenko was finally admitted as a cadet. On 2 March, Osipenko had her hair cut short, put on her uniform and admired the blue insignia with silver wings on her collar tabs. Her life as a military woman struggling against male preconceptions of female character traits and abilities began. It turned out that the decision to admit women was not tantamount to an immediate change in the military male mindset, but was the beginning of Osipenko's gradual entrance into male space, an entrance that was punctuated by a constant demolition of distrust, scepticism and male discomfort. The struggle revolved around both the trivial and major issues that structured the life of a soldier. The right to guard duty, to military camp life and to participation in manoeuvres was initially denied Osipenko. Taking into consideration the ‘scientifically proven biological differences’ of women and simultaneously, protecting male prerogatives, school commanders did not assign night guard duties to Osipenko, saying she might fall asleep due to women’s general physical weakness. In her first summer at the school, the command did not wish that she and other female cadets relocate to the school summer camp, insisting that women should stay in the barracks to protect their health. Already a military bomber pilot, ‘an officer of the Red Army’, to use her self-definition, Osipenko worried that commanders would not include her in their plans for manoeuvres: ‘I knew that manoeuvres give a commander much knowledge and experience: manoeuvres nearly feel like a war situation … I wanted very much to participate’. Initially meeting denial every time, Osipenko took action: she talked to her commanders, acquired more permissions and justified her request.
with her outstanding military performance. In her memoirs, she remembered her first months as a bomber pilot when her crew, thanks to her flying skills, was the only crew that received excellent marks for bombing a bridge. Her performance during her first manoeuvres, the closest one could get to a war situation and the threat of violence in peacetime, earned her her first medal.

However, proving oneself as a capable and competent bomber pilot was a never-ending task. Admittance into a male military community took years, and had to be repeated at every new place of assignment. The taboo against military women turned out to be breakable, and Osipenko indicated these moments of fusion with the male military brotherhood by including herself into one military ‘we’. For two years at the Kacha school, Osipenko fought against contempt and scepticism and proved herself a disciplined soldier, a capable pilot and a reliable comrade. The result of this struggle was her journey in the happy company of eight male fellow cadets to the Kharkov garrison where they had been assigned. In her story, Osipenko included her fellow ex-cadets and herself into one homogeneous group where her gender finally ceased to provoke discomfort and distrust.\(^{38}\)

Upon her arrival at the Kharkov garrison however, the cycle of initial distrust and discomfort amongst males was set in motion again. A navigator assigned to work under Osipenko’s command not only distrusted Osipenko, but felt ashamed and psychologically ‘not well’, according to Osipenko. Breaking down a taboo of military life took a psychological toll upon men in Osipenko’s immediate proximity and under her command. At the core of male psychological discomfort and sceptical negativity were multiple reversals of traditional gender relations and roles that Osipenko’s and other women officers’ presence introduced into military life. As a hierarchical institution, the army put officer Osipenko in charge of male pilots and required her to evaluate and report upon their performance. But the reversal of power relationships was only one of several problems. A concern about Osipenko’s ability to fight, that is, to inflict destruction and kill ‘like a man’, was a question that, from the point of view of traditional gender norms, could never be resolved satisfactorily. The first concern of Osipenko’s navigator was, for example, whether she could accomplish military missions at all. When she proved her military excellence in destroying the practice enemy, she only created grounds for another round of male anxiety, this time, about the destruction of traditional visions of women as essentially non-violent. Combined with her physical endurance (unlike her male comrades Osipenko did not succumb to stress) and cold-blooded courage, Osipenko embodied a radically unconventional and potentially explosive form of femininity.\(^{39}\)

Osipenko’s particular garrison managed to accept her into its military camaraderie. In her memoir, she again began to use an all inclusive military ‘we’ in relation to the Kharkov garrison when her narrative moves into the mid-1930s. Describing the garrison’s relocation from camp into the barracks, Osipenko divided the relocating party into ‘women and children’ and ‘us’ where she included herself: ‘Women and children were moved in the first order, we followed flying in one column’.\footnote{40}

The meaning of this admission into the male space of professional violence needs further exploration. What is crucial for our discussion of Stalinist womanhood is that Osipenko’s militarism did not depend upon her erasure of femininity. Having successfully entered the male space, she did not become a traditional man. A self-conscious military woman in love with her uniform and bomber plane (she later switched to a fighter plane), Osipenko also infused her self-image with representations of her irrepressible femininity. She adored flowers, planting them around her camp and carrying them in her plane when not on mission.\footnote{41}

Osipenko’s female friends also captured this dimension of Osipenko’s womanhood, which oscillated between being virtually indistinguishable from men to being eccentrically feminine. Marina Raskova, the first female officer-navigator, who worked with the famous Soviet pioneer of navigation A. V. Beliakov at the Air Force Academy, described her first encounter with Osipenko in her 1939 memoirs, \textit{A Navigator’s Notes}. Waiting for her in the hall of the Air Force Administrative Department, she failed to recognise Osipenko in a crowd of male pilots. Raskova was about to leave when one of them came up to her and introduced himself in a ‘feminine voice’. Raskova at last recognised Osipenko, whose photos she had seen in newspapers: ‘Polina, I did not distinguish you from the men!’ Osipenko’s and Raskova’s mutual friend, Valentina Grizodubova, a non-military sports pilot, shared Raskova’s first impression of Osipenko’s behaviour, appearance, military self-presentation: ‘most often in a military uniform … strong, well-built, firm, with a confident gait, a real captain, brave and slim’.\footnote{42}

Osipenko’s ability to transform herself from a ‘military man’ into, what Grizodubova called a ‘charming woman’ was repeatedly noted by her two friends. In Grizodubova’s account, Osipenko’s transformations were effortless and natural: sometimes, ‘this captain whose firm hand holds the steering-wheel’ became a ‘charming woman’ with ‘white wattled shoes, a stylish white dress, falling down in soft folds, and … with with a mandatory bouquet’. ‘It is impossible’, explained Grizodubova, ‘to imagine Polina without the live flowers which she loves so much.’\footnote{43}

Describing their friend, the two women shared and exhibited the extremes of her personality. They also added another crucial dimension...
to their picture of military womanhood. Both Raskova and Grizodubova were mothers who relegated parts of their maternal responsibilities to their husbands and relatives. In her memoirs, Raskova remembered how her little daughter was becoming used to her mother’s frequent absences and brief encounters. Assigned a mission, she would leave her daughter in the care of her husband and mother. Her and the other women’s military life created a need for a non-traditional division of labour in the family and created spaces where women, departing on missions, would leave children to men, staying home and waiting.44

Kept largely outside the public realm until 1938, military women’s lives and self-narratives suddenly became the centre of public attention that year. The image of Soviet womanhood, effortlessly combining military expertise in war, violence, femininity and redefined motherhood figured in Pravda and Komsomol’skaia Pravda as a new gender constellation at the readers’ disposal. The traditionally incompatible features began to merge. Thanks to the new image of a woman serving in the military and preparing for war, sharp differences between the feminine and the masculine began to diffuse. The journalistic silence about young women’s role in the future war was also broken.

The occasion for the new discourse that gave military women an access to the limelight was a long-distance flight aboard a heavy aircraft from Moscow to the Far East that Osipenko, Raskova and Grizodubova undertook in September 1938. Approved by the government and by Stalin himself, the flight immediately acquired a historical and military significance in the press. The three women flew to the far east to demonstrate the ability of female pilots to reach the most distant Soviet border in twenty-four hours, in case of invasion. In recognition of their mission, Osipenko, Raskova and Grizodubova became the first Soviet women to receive the honorary title of Heroes of the Soviet Union. As such, they entered the previously exclusive masculine space of war heroism and publicly acquired recognition of military capabilities. Journalists in Pravda and Komsomol’skaia Pravda called upon young men and women to see the three women as their role models.45

The coverage of the flight validated young women’s dreams about the army and war. The multidimensionality of the three women’s personalities worked out over the last decade in military and civilian life, emerged in feature stories in Pravda and Komsomol’skaia Pravda as well as in Osipenko, Raskova and Grizodubova’s accounts about the flight. Both Osipenko and Raskova also took advantage of the newly available newspaper coverage to state professional agendas for themselves and other young women. From the pages of Komsomol’skaia Pravda they stressed that women would be combatants in the future war. Speaking on behalf of Soviet women in general, Osipenko assured
her readers that, ‘after our flight from Moscow to the far east...even our enemies understand that Soviet women are capable of taking an active part in the war [action]’. In relation to the specific air battles of future war, Marina Raskova in her Pravda article expressed an equal amount of confidence about ‘our women pilots’ ability to rout the enemy without mercy’.46

The newspapers asked military experts and Osipenko and Raskova’s immediate commanders to comment on their behalf. The male military opinion featured in press unanimously praised the women’s outstanding military abilities. As Air Forces Commander-in-Chief A. D. Loktionov put it, speaking from personal experience, women were ‘often better organised, had greater command over themselves and paid more attention to plane maintenance than many men’.47 In his article in Komosomol’skaia Pravda, Loktionov specifically engaged with the enthusiastic response from young women who, having had their dreams legitimised by Osipenko, Raskova and Grizodubova’s official recognition, began to write to the Air Forces Headquarters and to the three female pilots themselves asking for assistance on admission to military schools. Loktionov’s comments made women’s military participation in the future war a publicly stated option. Though he suggested that young women stay within the OSOVIAKHIM system of flying clubs, he assured them that ‘when necessary they would always be able to exchange the steering wheel of a passenger, sport, or training plane to the steering wheel of a fighter, bomber, observer plane’.48

Tentative conclusions and agenda for future research

By the late 1930s, combat duty in wartime became an acknowledged option for women in Stalinist political culture. The inclusion of war into the realm of women’s rights registered a major challenge to surviving traditional notions of the feminine and masculine as well as to the traditional gendered divisions of responsibilities and prerogatives that European societies allotted and still allot to their citizens. New military women and men in Soviet press, literature, at home and in the army began to share qualities and lifestyles that belonged to different gender worlds. The image of a young woman as a sniper or a bomber pilot routing the enemy combined the conventionally incompatible: femininity and military prowess; the determination to kill and motherhood; courage and disciplined cold-bloodedness.

Whilst this image of the woman fighter legitimised already existing female dreams about military service and armed participation in war as embodied by Osipenko and other military pilots, celebrated military women also provided Stalinist society with role models of female
military heroism. Young women of this decade now had female heroines whom they could place next to their idealised male heroes. These young women collected Raskova, Osipenko and Grizodubova’s pictures, which they cut out of newspapers, and read their autobiographical stories. Marina Chechneva, for example, interpreted Raskova, Osipenko and Grizodubova’s ‘heroic flight’ to the far east as a promise that ‘things are changing’ and that women would be admitted to military schools.49

This image of the woman fighter also suggested ways of combining family and maternal responsibilities with military service. The most radical message of the late 1930s celebration of women military pilots consisted of imagining young women leaving their families in a time of war. Like a man, a young woman was now permitted to leave care of her family to her relatives and spouse and, instead, to die for her family and country. When not at war, Raskova and Grizodubova’s examples indicated compromises allowing women to be mothers and to keep the demands of motherhood under control by sharing family and maternal responsibilities with their husbands and relatives.

New notions of the masculine also loomed behind the woman fighter image. Armed women with the option of going to war compromised the clear-cut vision of a woman in need of a male military protector. A young Soviet woman was herself ready to defend men. Long-held male prerogatives to heroic death and military violence were thus themselves violated by armed women.

Contrary to prevalent scholarly insistence on the monolithic coherence and uniformity of Stalinist culture, it thus contained different models and combinations of Soviet femininity intended for different generational audiences and ranged from instinctive motherhood to a ‘burning desire’ to abandon maternal duties in the name of the defence of the country.

The prevalence and motivating power of the new vision of femininity based on military womanhood revealed its grasp on Stalinist youth as well as Stalinist leadership in 1941 when thousands of young women volunteered to go to the front. Later, they described their decision to go to war as a spontaneous reaction to the news about the invasion. The recurrent Russian word that they used to distinguish their war intentions apart from home front and military support activities was ‘voevat’ – to take part in armed fighting.50

The Soviet government, hesitant until the Autumn of 1941, ultimately decided to admit female volunteers into the field army. In October 1942, I. V. Stalin signed the appropriate orders. The voluntary conscription of women with or without military training was announced through OSOVIAKHIM and Komsomol organisations. Female regiments of
fighter pilots, dive-bombers, night-bombers, snipers, riflewomen, machine-gunners and mortar women were ordered to be formed. Young women had to undergo an interview with a Komsomol organisation and medical committee. The majority of those selected were sent to military pilot, infantry and tank schools where they were trained. Among the 800,000 women sent to the front were thousands of commanders of rifle, machine-gun and mortar subdivisions. In 1943 alone, 1,388 women infantry commanders graduated from the Riazan infantry school. Women also fought in armoured and artillery units as tank commanders, tank snipers and operators of field guns.51

All but one of the young women featured in this article fought at the front. Marina Chechneva and Evgeniia Rudneva became night-bomber pilots. Rudneva died in 1943 on mission. Valentina Chudaeva became an anti-aircraft gun commander. Ol’ga Iamshchikova, Raia Beliaeva and Valeriia Khomiakova flew fighter planes. Raia Beliaeva and Valeriia Khomiakova died in an air battle. Marina Raskova, who became a dive-bomber regiment commander, died in 1943. Valentina Grizodubova became the only woman to command an all-male long-range bomber regiment. The one exception is Polina Osipenko, who died in a plane crash in 1939.

Out of all the army units recruiting women, only the Air Force had prepared women officers before the war. Female Air Force pilots commanded the formation of three women regiments: the fighter, the dive-bomber and night-bomber regiments. Marina Raskova saw her mission to help young women’s dreams to become military pilots come true, as Marina Kozarinova recalled. According to the memoirs of female pilots, Raskova and her regiments had a conscious goal, through excellent fighting, to assure women’s permanent presence in the army. They wanted not only to help out, but to stay. They were also aware of the lack of historical precedent of their undertaking and expected to be subjects of future books and plays. Valeriia Khomiakova was the first woman to shoot down an enemy plane. Her regiment immediately wrote it into history: ‘Our count had begun!’ remembered Slovokhotova, regiment chief of chemical services, ‘for the first time in the history of aviation, a woman fighter pilot shot down an enemy bomber in a night battle’.52 The all-women night-bomber regiment routinely surpassed male regiments in the number of missions conducted per night and in the accuracy of their bombing.53

These women’s expectations of their inclusion in history books and fiction were never realised. Women with weapons in their hands, who excelled at dying and killing, provoked an unexpected popular and an intense, disorganised hostility to the female sacrifice. This reaction surfaced in front and home front folk stories and rumours, invaded Soviet literature and survived in memoirs of women fighters. The
backlash radically reinterpreted the meanings assigned to female fighting by official culture. In rumours and folk stories, the front women’s effort was reduced to prostitution and husband-hunting. Already in Soviet literature by 1943, women fighting at the front and killing the enemy gave way to images of wives and civilian young girls waiting for men to return home. 54

It is here where an agenda for further research on women, war and violence starts. Having outlined the complexity of prewar Stalinist political culture, gender dynamics and mass mobilisations campaigns, this article has traced the rise of new notions of female and male conduct. The price of living out the ideals on the front of World War II and the consequences of those achievements for postwar Soviet social and gender realities have yet to be explored. At the centre of future investigations will be the nature of popular reaction against the most radical transgression of gender lines, as well as the cost paid by women veterans on their return to civilian lives.

Notes

3. Valentina Chudaeva, Interview with Svetlana Alekseyevich in Svetlana Alekseyevich, U voiny ne zhenskoe litso (Minsk: Mastats. Lit., 1985), p. 139. In the early 1980s, the Belorussian journalist Svetlana Alekseyevich recorded and collected women veterans’ testimonies and letters and published them in U voiny ne zhenskoe litso (The War’s Face is not Feminine) (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1988).


11. See a report to the All-Union Young Communist League Congress by A. V. Kosarev, the League’s leader and his discussion of I. V. Stalin’s definition of the future war: A. V. Kosarev, ‘Zadachi molodezhi v oborone sotsialisticheskogo otechestva’, *Komsomols’kaia Pravda*, 13 April 1936.


16. A. V. Kosarev, ‘Zadachi molodezhi v oborone sotsialisticheskogo otechestva’, Komsomol’skaia Pravda, 13 April 1936


18. Vera Shtafinskaia’s Photograph, Komsomol’skaia Pravda, 22 August 1937; see also ‘Pilot Tester Katia Mednikova’ Photograph, Komsomol’skaia Pravda, 6 May 1939.


37. P. D. Osipenko, ‘Ot motygi k stalinskому samoleту’, Oktiabr, 6–7 (1940), pp. 17, 19, 24, 32.
40. P. D. Osipenko, ‘Ot motygi k stalinskому samoleту’, Oktiabr, 6–7 (1940), p. 27.
41. P. D. Osipenko, ‘Ot motygi k stalinskому samoleту’, Oktiabr, 6–7 (1940), pp. 20, 32.
49. M. P. Checherina, Nebo ostaetsia nashim (Moscow, 1976), p. 17. See also memoirs by Nataliia Kravtsova, a night-bomber in World War II, Nataliia Kravtsova, Ot zakata do rassveta (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1968), p. 27.
50. See Nataliia Kravtsova, Ot zakata do rassveta (Moscow: Politizdat, 1968), p. 8; Valentina Chudaeva, Interview with Svetlana Aleksievich in Svetlana Aleksievich, U voiny ne zhenskoe litso (Minsk, 1985), p. 139.