

Workers, Soldiers, Partisans!

The roles of women in war time USSR.

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“Everything for the victory to the front from the women of USSR!”

Mariya was stoic as she watched her childhood sweetheart kiss his mother goodbye.

How was she meant to stay here in the warmth and safety of home knowing the dangers he was about to face? How could she say goodbye when all she wanted to

do was beg him to stay? Vladimir came towards her slowly, drawing out their last moments together as if he could postpone the war from happening. Mariya flung herself into his arms. She buried her face into his neck and cemented the moment into her memory, it may be the last time she will ever see him again. Once Vladimir was gone Mariya felt lost. Chores that had once been the norm became monumental tasks without the knowledge that she would see



Vladimir in the evenings. She felt worthless as she stayed at home to help her mother with sweeping the floors, washing clothes or doing the dishes. All she could think about was Vladimir bravely fighting the Nazis, risking his life for their safety. News from the front lines over the coming weeks was not positive and Mariya worried all the more.

As the weeks turned into month's life got harder. Rationing began to take its toll and the danger became more apparent as each home was required to cover the windows with blackout curtains to stop the Luftwaffe from seeing them. As more and more of the men left to serve the motherland Mariya began to see more of the posters aimed at young women. This was her chance to make a difference and contribute to the war effort. The quicker the Red Army was victorious the sooner she would see Vladimir again. The next day Mariya volunteered herself to serve in the factories. She could take Vladimir's place on the home front, serve the country in a substantial way and earn extra rations for her family, which would make their hardship more bearable.

The hours were long and the work was hard. Mariya had changed in the weeks she had worked at the munitions factory. Her arms were more toned, her hands had roughened and her once radiant skin had lost its normal glow. Despite the hard work, Mariya was thriving. She had made friends with the other women who served the motherland in the factories. She felt like she made a substantial difference to the war effort. Every shell she had a hand in making she imagined it being sent to Vladimir. Providing the shells for him to defend himself was her only way of trying to keep him safe. The more she could make the more the German front lines would recede and the quicker the war would be done with. Mariya took comfort and strength from this thought. Vladimir as well as every other women's husbands or sweethearts were relying on the factories to supply their weaponry. Mariya could not fail them.

The Luftwaffe was passing over the city more and more often. The soviet falcons were hard press to stop them. Their numbers were just not enough. One night shift while Mariya was fixing one of the broken conveyer belts a shout went out across the factory floor. "Air raid! Air raid! The warning system was delayed. Get to the basement NOW!!!"

Mariya and the other workers jumped into action and ran down into the basement. The door shut just as the first bomb hit close to the factory. Mariya prayed the ceiling would hold out against the Luftwaffe's wrath as the walls shook with the impact of another explosion. When the morning came, Mariya made her way outside. She was covered in dust and small bits of rubble but the basement had held firm and they had all survived. The factory had significant structural damage and was moved to an underground hanger. No amount of bombs would stop them from getting munitions to the front. Mariya thought of Vladimir more and more as the months turned into years. She knew he would not be the fresh-faced young man she had bid goodbye to but that was the only memory she had of him. His letters were infrequent and often delayed but at least he was alive. He had survived two harsh winters and had been awarded accolades for his courage and endurance in the field. Mariya was proud but all she dreamed of was the end of war when she could have him in her arms once again.

It was 6 months until Stalin declared victory over the fascist enemy. A cheer went across the factory floor as the women laughed, hugged and cried. Mariya was elated.

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Vladimir was finally safe. Yet despite the relief Mariya also knew her time at the factory would come to an end quickly now. The independence and camaraderie she had found would be taken away and she wasn't sure she would be happy to be just a housewife anymore.

“Put every bullet into the German”

Nina was 13 when she first held a gun. It was cold and heavy in her slim nimble hands. Her heart was running away with its self, she was that nervous. The practical classes were always the most ferociously competitive especially since the boys hated to loose to a girl. Nina was slightly built with a slim pixie like face. Few would ever expect her to hold her own in the physically challenging classes. Yet she did just that. Nina was the youngest of five children and had always had to fight to be noticed and heard in a family that big. Rations were always limited in her household with the workingmen getting the biggest share, it left little for the youngest of the family. As the most petite of the children Nina had to be quick both on her feet and with her wit to win any fight she had with her siblings. Above all else Nina hated to loose.

Nina took a deep breath as she drew the gun up to eye level. She knew her brothers would never let her hear the end of it if she missed. The shot cracked the air as the bullet flew true to its target. Nina stared in amazement. Her classmates looked just as shocked as she was. As they all looked towards the target they didn't see the onlooker stood in the shadows of the building watching their practice rounds. He noted Nina's shot in a small leather bound notebook he carried by his side.

As the years went by Nina grew not only in height but also in the confidence of her convictions. Nina's shooting skills were unparalleled. Her dexterous hand eye

coordination made her a formidable opponent on the range. Nina had found something she excelled at and it made her proud to gain her peers respect. She was a well-liked girl in school and made distinctions in every class she took. Her hard work stemmed from a desire to prove herself and now she had surpassed that desire. Nina was turning into a front-runner of every class she took. Despite being a standout student Nina was also troubled. The man who sometimes stood in the shadows with his small leather notebook had been coming to watch her time on the shooting range more often than ever. He had never spoken to Nina but his close watching made her nervous.

On the morning of graduation her shots had hit every target without fail. Nina had been selected to deliver a speech on behalf of her cohort of Soviet students. She was a fine public speaker and spoke with conviction when she declared them “ a new generation ready to become a hero when ordered by the country. We are ready for labor and defense!” The crowd cheered loudly. The man with the leather notebook approached Nina as the crowd of students left the hall. Over the hubbub of the crowd he spoke clearly in her ear “That was very impressive.” “Thank you” said Nina with a cautious smile. It was the first time the man had ever actually spoken to her directly.

“Have you considered what your future holds?”

Nina knew that as a standout student, especially in the military classes, she would excel in the Red Army. It was her ambition to one day lead her own unit of men but for now she would be content as a soldier.

"I will be volunteering for the Army"

"I see. I had hoped you would."

"Oh really?"

"You see Nina, I was sent by Zhukov to find the next wave of snipers. Specifically female snipers."

Nina's heart gave a start. She hadn't even considered aiming for such a renowned position.

"I've been watching your skills progress for years and I want you to be part of the unit. We must put every bullet into the Germans before they do the same to us"



Nina's head was spinning. She had wanted to serve the motherland once she was old enough but to be offered such a renowned position was elating as well as truly terrifying.

Nina was taken to the headquarters of the Women's sniper unit. There were other women of varying ages but all had the same crack shot talent. Over the course of the next month Nina along side her fellow comrades honed their skills and were trained to not only shoot but to survive in the field. Nina was only 18 when she was sent on her first mission. Nina was a crack shot with inanimate targets but killing a man seemed different to her. She didn't know if she would be able to pull the trigger when the time came. However, as she passed through a Ukrainian village she saw a dead young girl who had been impaled on a stake by fascists. After this, so much hatred and anger welled up in Nina that she was no longer frightened to kill mercilessly. The first, second, third hit until her count reached dozens. Besides, through the telescopic sight, the Germans were far away, not people just moving targets.

“Partisans, revenge with no mercy!”

Eva was 17 years old when she volunteered for the partisan unit that was one of many formed in the war. She was too young to remember the Civil war but she knew from her fathers stories war was not the great excitement all the young people dreamt of. It was a cruel, harsh experience and it brought out the very worst in people. “War changes people Eva, and not always for the better.”

Despite all of her fathers warnings Eva knew she had to fight. Kursk had fallen quickly into German hands and the Red Army was not ready yet. Stalin had called for the people to resist for the motherland and Eva felt that it was her duty to act.

Eva joined the local unit, at first they were disordered and their attempts at taking single shots at German troops were chaotic. They needed more help than the local farmers could muster. Over the coming weeks Moscow sent officers to infiltrate enemy lines and train the partisans. Soon Eva and her comrades were trained enough that they could conduct sabotage missions on a much larger scale.

Moscow sent them updates on German camp positions and supply routes. Leon, the second son of one of the farmers Eva grew up near was a natural military tactician. The most impressive part about Leon was that he was only 15 years old. Eva stilled remembered his impish grin as a child when he used to take sweets from her mothers hand. He came up with a plan to completely cut off the German supply line into Kursk. The Unit would split up. Under the cover of darkness they would attack the German camp with everything they had, explosives, grenades and firearms.

While the attack was in full swing Leon knew the German soldiers that guarded the railway supply station would be called back to aid in the fighting. It was then that Eva and he would lay the tracks with explosives and destroy any chance of the German making it through the coming winter. It was decided that the plan was a sound one. Eva was not so sure. What if the guards didn't leave their post? What if the fight didn't last long enough for them to lay the explosives successfully? However, there was little other option if the unit wanted to help the motherland then they must take this chance despite the risks.

That night at exactly midnight the first grenade was throw and hell rose up to earth. Eva stood paralyzed watching the fight unfold.

"Eva we must hurry or it will all be for nothing." Urged Leon. "Come on!" Eva jumped into action on his words.

"Yes we must be quick" Eva looked at Leon's shadowed face. He was far older than his years and it was then that she knew his plan would work.

Eva and Leon crept behind a coal box and watched as the guards heard the shots being fired. They looked confused and tense until a distant shout in German had them running towards the fight. This was their chance. Eva unraveled the wire and string while Leon packed the TNT strategically. They had just hooked up the explosives to the detonator when they heard shouts coming from behind. They had been seen! Leon threw Eva behind the coal box and slammed onto the detonator. He

was too close to the explosion and was thrown backwards with the force of it. Eva saw it all in slow motion as Leon's body hit the ground, unmoving.

"Leon! Leon, please get up! Please!" cried Eva as the dust began to settle. She looked around scared that the Germans would have caught up to them by now. As she squinted through the dust Eva saw the contorted bodies of the soldiers; they had been killed instantly by the explosion. Leon coughed and choked as he took in a breath of dust filled air. Eva held him to her chest as he regained consciousness.

"You stupid boy, you did it!" laughed Eva as Leon looked up in confusion. The impish grin she remembered from her childhood spread slowly across his face.

"We should get back to the woods," whispered Leon hoarsely while the smile never left his face. Eva helped him stand as they heard the retreat signal from the main fighting unit. Their mission was complete but they were still in grave danger until they were back in the depths of the woods.

Eva and Leon survived the winter with help from local farmers who they could rely on for grain to get them to the spring. They received more intelligence that a German official of great notoriety was coming through Kursk to boost the morale of the surviving troops. Despite the supply sabotage the German troops in Kursk had half of their unit remaining thanks to their torture of the peasants and farmers for food. Many of those farmers and their families had not survived the winter including

Eva's aging father. Eva looked towards Leon's tactical skills for revenge. She was hell bent on destroying their morale and winning the war.

"You want to kill this official? You know he's not a soldier." Leon asked seriously.

"Yes but he's important to them and I'll do it with or without you," replied Eva.

"In that case we better start planning," Leon said with a solemn smile.

They had minimal time to prepare but Eva refused to back down.

Leon rigged explosives on the road the official was supposed to drive

down and had 3 men and Eva waiting in burrows on either side of the road with rifles loaded and ready. It was a long 3 hours before they heard the rev of the German trucks come towards them.

"Hold steady until I say. Is that clear?" whispered Leon. Eva nodded at him as she placed her rifle into position against her shoulder. As the trucks came towards them, Leon saw the crest of the official glinting in the sunlight. He was in the second truck.



Leon knew they would be travelling in convoy and timed his explosion perfectly to take out the lead truck. As the dust and rubble cleared Eva saw the official stumble out of his truck and behind the door.

"Damn it! I can't get a clear shot!" raged Eva as one of the older farmers drew his rifle up to eye level. In a single shot the farmer hit the officials showing forearm shocking him into showing himself to the partisans.

"He's all yours," shouted the farmer with a sly smile on his face. Eva's eyes gleamed with revenge as she sighted the official. In one shot as quick as a breath he was dead. Eva had killed him and with him the German troops morale crumbled ever more. She thought it would make her feel better knowing she had avenged her father. It only made her feel hollow. It could never bring him back.

Within weeks the Red Army marched through Kursk and liberated the people from Nazi control. Eva was offered a position in the army along side all of the partisan men who had fought for their freedom. Leon had jumped at the chance to become an explosives expert in the Red Army but Eva was done. She would miss his impish grin and the excitement of sabotage but she could not bring herself to continue. Her heart ached for the loss of her father. He had been right. War does change people in a way that can never be reversed. Eva returned home to her remaining family; she had given all she had.

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Images

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