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ROLE OF SOVIET WOMEN IN SECOND WORLD WAR IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Summary

The Second World War, the bloodiest war to have occurred in the history of mankind had an impact on the society of both the allies and the axis powers. Soviet Union was a major participant in the Second World War. The Soviet Union is said to have been the most affected losing an estimated 26 million citizens and an estimated 11 million soldiers during the war. The contribution of women in the Second World War cannot be forgotten, the war could be considered a watershed in terms of women's involvement in military and intelligence. Soviet Union had the largest involvement of women in the war. This paper would be an attempt to show that the Second World War was not a space reserved only for the men, there was a strong female presence in the war and the important role of these women played helped break the barrier of patriarchy.

Key Words: Women, War, Patriotic, Soviet Union, Eastern Front.

Introduction

In this era of modernisation and globalisation where the world has achieved tremendous economic and technological advancement, but the society is still shackled by patriarchal thinking and structures. Men have been dominant in every social sphere, and patriarchal authority is seen as legitimate. Women, as stated in Engels *Origins of Family, Private Property and the State* were seen as mere instrument of production, that women oppression is an accepted feature of the class society; an approach that continues to prevail in many societies all over the world.

War is patriarchal in nature. The celebration of victory mainly highlights the feats of the male population. The glorification of the male valour in war, has been taken for granted, while the contribution of women, though no lesser than the male counterparts, both in the battlefield and at home, has never been adequately acknowledged.

The Second World War (1939-1945), recognized as the bloodiest war to have occurred in the history of mankind, had an impact on the society of both the allies and the axis powers. It is considered as a watershed moment for women's involvement both in the battlefield and on other fronts. In most of the major countries the war was fought by just the male population while the women had a limited role.

Women and the Second World War

One of the major powers the United States of America was hesitant to involve women. Since most able-bodied men had to go for military service women stepped into various civilian jobs, including positions which were earlier closed for them. Large number of women who were previously not involved in the workforce now became part of the American workforce.

There were many women who moved out of their homes to take advantage of the wartime opportunities, this however was limited as many were restricted to organising home front initiatives, to raise funds and occupy the jobs left by the male population who entered the military. The American government along with the private sector had instructions for women on many fronts and scrutinised their responses to the wartime emergency. The main message was that the war and the opportunities provided were limited and would end simultaneously (McEuen June 2016).

United States refused to allow the participation of women in the battlefield; as a result, many women were encouraged to work in factories instead of getting involved in the war. Some women, who were recruited in the armed forces, were limited to stereotypical and low-level jobs such as cleaning and typing (Adams 1993). The women, who had joined the armed forces, had to forfeit their dependency allowance, a stipend specially given to the Prisoners of Wars (POW) and their family, if the POW was found to be 30 percent or more disabled (Adams 1993). This step was taken by the United States in order to discourage the female population from joining in the battlefield. Another measure taken by the United States was that the pregnant soldiers and the menopausal personnel were discharged as this natural life change, according to the patriarchal male population in the army would render the women permanently incapacitated (Vajskop 2008). A country which at that point was considered as the freest country in the world, women were openly and actively discouraged from being involved in the war, keeping up with the patriarchal notion of society. The women were even discouraged from the rear echelon slots which would otherwise been given to men to keep them away from the forefront of the war zone.

The British, another major power involved in the war, also had limited women involved in the battlefield; with most of the women involved were non-combatants. The women played an important role in the home front with them running households and fighting a daily battle of rationing, recycling, reusing and cultivating food in various allotments and gardens. Many women were involved in the role of mechanics, engineers, munitions bus and fire engine drivers. At the beginning of the war only women of the age of 20-30 were called upon but by 1943, women both married and unmarried were openly involved in the war from the British side. (Defence 2015)

When it comes to the French the women during the war were equally affected as their allies. The women were involved in the domestic front with them contributing their share of the economy. With the outbreak of war, they were asked to replace the men who had gone to the battlefield in the

factories. The state became the major employer of women especially in the Ministry of Defence before the fall of France in 1940. After the fall of France under the Nazi regime, an approximate total of 1,850,000 men were taken as prisoners (Daimond 1999). This imprisonment of the males further left a vacuum in the social and economic structure of France which was needed to be filled by the women in order to prevent further turmoil. The women were employed in the factories and other sectors of the workforce which the manpower (Pollard 1998). Women acted as the heads of the household making strong decisions in relation to the family, this was an important role for the survival of the society during this period. Due to food shortages obtaining food was also an important role which had to be done by the women (Rosbottom 2014). The war period brought about a change in the societal structure of a very rigid gender biased France, though there was a change in the social structure in France, the strong rigid society only allowed women to be involved in the domestic front thus restricting their involvement in the war front.

Role of Soviet Women in the Second World War

Another major participant of the Second World War was the Soviet Union, who had formed an alliance with the allied powers (France, United Kingdom, and United States of America). The Soviet Union was established in 1921 after the October Revolution of the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov known as Lenin. The Soviet Union came to be known as a 'Marxian Experiment', as it was based on the Marxian principles of Communism and Socialism.

The Soviet Union came into existence after the October Revolution of 1917, which overthrew the Tsarist Monarchy and established a new form of government in the country. The October Revolution followed and capitalised on the February Revolution which had overthrew the Tsarist Monarchy and formed a provisional government transferring the power from the monarchy to the Republic. The first leader of the Soviet Union was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov who had served as head of the Soviet Union from 1921 till 1924. After his death he was succeeded by Joseph Stalin who was under the tutelage of Lenin. Stalin ruled the Soviet Union from 1922 until his death in 1952.

Stalin witnessed the period of the Second World War. Stalin seeking neutrality in the war signed a pact the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of 1939 (Non-Aggression Treaty) with Germany. The Germans however in 1941, invaded the Soviet Union thus initiating the war in the Eastern Front, this in return led to the strong involvement of the Soviet Union in the war. The speed of the German invasion of Russia, shocked the Russians, this blitzkrieg turned the home fronts of the Russians into frontlines in a matter of moments, so the need for mobilization was highly imperative.

The Great Patriotic War as it is known in the Russian history will always be remembered as the war won by the Soviets. The Soviet Union is said to have been the most affected from all the major powers who were involved in the war. The USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) had lost an estimate of 26 million citizens and an estimate of 11 million soldiers during the war. The largest battle during the war was fought between the Soviets and the Germans in the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942-43.

The Soviet Union though was a patriarchal society in its roots, the women in the nation had experienced better treatment as compared to their counterparts in Western Europe and Northern America, women in the Soviet society had more access to the social development outside their home. They were openly involved in the nation building process, statecraft and commerce and finally when the time came, they were involved in the war. The women were more openly involved in the defence of their motherland and the frontline warfare as compared to any other society during the Second World War.

What made women involvement from the Soviet Union in the war more unique as compared to the rest of the nations was mostly focused on the Soviet ideology. In the freer and developed nations of the West like the Great Britain, women participation was not a surprise as the women had the freedom to contribute to the state. The image of the Western world towards the Soviet Union however had always been negative it was the image of suppression. However, the Soviet Union became the first country to use women in regular combat and warfare, the understanding towards the Soviet Union changed.

Cyril Black once mentioned that 'Soviet Union represented a bewildering combination of modern and traditional elements' this quote was the best way to describe the place of women place in the Soviet era. (Riha 1969). Women's involvement was expected in the Soviet society, as this idea of equality among men and women were already existent in the Russian society since earlier periods of history, this was not exclusive only to the Soviet society. Russian women have a history of serving alongside men.

The Eastern Front was looked after by the Soviet Union and the female population took many important roles during this period. While many members of the female population did share the involvement in the workforce back in the Soviet Union women were involved in the industrial sector, the transport, agriculture and other civilian roles which also included working double shifts to free up more of the male population to be involved in the warfare and increase the military production, there were also a large number of women who got involved in the army, working mainly as medics in the army. About 3% of the military population were included of women in the Soviet army, which included a number of 800,000 women (Sakaida 2003).

Many women were felicitated and about 89 of the women who were involved in the war were awarded with the highest honour of the Soviet Union, the Hero of the Soviet Union (Nieuwint 2018). Among those who were awarded some served as pilots, machine gunners, tank crew operatives and were also involved in auxiliary roles. The importance of women particularly Soviet women involvement in the Second World War cannot be disputed. The United States Ambassador to London John G Winant was quoted as saying that the Second World War "more than any other war in history is a woman war". (Ian Dear 1995).

During the initial phase of the war, when the Germans attacked the Soviets in 1941, many women wanted to participate in the war but were not allowed to serve. However this was shocking as Joseph Stalin had gone to large extent to change the perception of the Soviet Union in the international arena, he made an attempt to showcase the importance of women in the field of science and industry. (Sakaida 2003)

Stalin wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya had headed the women wing of the Soviet Communist Party and was a champion of women rights she ensured equal pay, divorce and abortion to be more accessible. In theory the women were equal to the men, in the 1930's the communist party became more rigid as many members of the male population still harboured strong chauvinistic attitudes. There were many individuals who believed that women should not be directly involved in the war, they couldn't see their women, wives and picking up weapons and fighting in the war.

Universal military service laws of 1925 and 1939 allowed women to be enlisted as volunteers who served mainly in medical services but they were openly discouraged from enlistment in the armed forces (Noggle 2001). Women who were sometimes accepted for training to become nurses, but most were persuaded that they could help the war effort by being enrolled as blood donors and to stay at home (Merridale 2005).

Open Involvement of Soviet Women in the War

However, after many losses due to the Operation Barbarossa, the nature and attitude of the Soviet Union changed ensuring a greater role for the women who wanted to be directly involved in the war to be given a chance. In the early stages, of the conflict, the fastest route for the women had been to be involved in the form of medics and the auxiliary units.

When one explores the history of the Soviet Union and the various communist ideologies, they will be able to understand the novelty of giving a chance to women to participate in direct combat in the war, it was not a decision due to desperation of troops but mostly it was based on the principle of Marxism. (Vajskop 2008).

The speed with which the women in the Soviet Union were eager to enlist and the depth of their involvement in the Second World War could be described as revolutionary. Other than having been involved in previous combat in Russian history, the Soviet women who had been involved in the Second World War were surrounded by circumstances which led to an upbringing which developed a wish to be involved in the war and to protect their homeland. Most of the women who were involved in the war were born in time frame of 1923 to 1926; these were the years which was famous for the rule under Joseph Stalin where the Soviet Union had gone through various social transformations, even the adolescence of these women was spent during the period known as the Great Terror of 1937-1938 (Markwick 2005). The Great Terror was period of political repression in the Soviet Union, which involved a large scale purge of the Communist party and the government officials, this also included the repression of the peasants and the Red Army leadership, imprisonment and executions. (Figs 2007). This showed the women in the Soviet Union were attributed with the willingness to volunteer for the army and for the war as a sign of patriotism towards the Soviet Union and also a strong desire to defend their motherland.

Majority of the women involved in direct combat from the Soviet Union, were part of the Air Defence Force. By the end of the war, there was no woman other than those who were already employed in industrial or governmental work and who had children, who was not subjected to mobilisation into the Air Defence Force. The women were given encouragement to provide assistance to help the motherland; they were prepared in every aspect of life for every possibility (Pennington 2002). There was a necessity to have the involvement of the female population into the Second World War. These Soviet women were critical to the success that the Soviet Union and its Red Army experienced in protecting their motherland and holding Hitler German Army eastern warfront.

The first major involvement of the Soviet women in the warzone was in the field of medicine. The Soviet government had recruited large number of female students, and then enrolled them into a crash course to prepare them for direct combat and the front line. After the training, they sent them to the war zone.

Statistically, about 41percent of all the physicians who were involved, 43 percent of the field surgeons, 43 percent of all medical assistants and 100percent of the nurses of the Soviet front were all from the women (Vajskop 2008). These women were not only in charge of the medical care for the wounded; they often entered the battlefield during heavy fire in order to retrieve the wounded soldiers. There was a thin line dividing the non-combatant medical personnel and fighting troops who were involved in the front.

The physicians who were involved in the frontline were often seen carrying their own weapons. Casualties among the female medics were second only to those women who had been part

of the fighting forces in the frontline (Engel 2004).

Many women signed up to be nurses in hopes to use that as a platform to get a chance to serve the country in the front line. An example of such case was Elena Iakovlena, a nurse who after just three months of training in the hospital deserted the hospital to go and join her comrades in the front line in February 1942 (Markwick 2005). Though they were expected to bear the same hardships as their male counterparts, the Soviet women in order to prove themselves to the males started to take up more difficult tasks sometimes more hazardous tasks (Overy 1998).

The Soviet women did prove themselves to their male counterparts, not only in the effort but also in warfare, as they were equally tenacious and brutal in the warfare. They were known not only for dealing with the enemy in an aggressive manner but also with the Soviet cowards, one such incident occurred when a Soviet nurse had volunteered to execute two men who had fled from the war (Alexievich 1985). Another Soviet woman who was working as a truck driver in Stalingrad confessed the delight on crushing some Germans beneath the wheels of her truck which was transporting ammunitions (Alexievich 1985).

Soviet women took pleasure in serving in the Air Forces, they performed their tasks with perfection, and the women who had served in the Soviet Air Forces were the most recognised among the various Soviet women who had served during the war. The airwomen who had served in the Soviet Air Forces were credited with being the first women to serve in the Air Forces in combat (Noggle 2001).

For the Soviet women aviators, one name was instrumental was Marina Raskova, a famed Soviet aviator also known as the Soviet Amelia Earhart. She rose to fame both as a pilot and a navigator in the 1930's. She also holds the record of being the first women to be a navigator in the Soviet Air Forces.

Raskova also used her personal connections with Joseph Stalin in order to convince the military to form three combat regiments for women. One famous regiment which was established was the 588th regiment an all women Air Force regiment (Braithwaite 2006). The 588th Aviation regiment was the first to take part in open combat and would take part in 4419 combat missions. Famous members of this regiment were Lydia Lityyak and Yekaterina Budanova, who were some of the first few female fighter aces. Other regiments included the 46th Taman Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment and the 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiments both openly involved in the war, the 46th Taman Guard Night Bomber Aviation Regiment was the most well-known of the regiments and was even given a special name by the Germans, the Germans called them the Night Witches.

While in the initial phase the Soviet women involvement in the fighting during the war was mainly as partisans, constituted large number of behind the scenes forces, the large involvement of women in the frontlines also increased. Of the millions of the Soviet women who served in the Red Army including the partisans over half of the women served at the front at a given period of time. Soviet women were also credited a being the only female combatants in the Second World War who fought outside the borders (Pennington 2002).

The Soviet women on the front line were active at quite an early period of the war. There was a woman battalion who took part in the defence of Odessa (Engel 2004). In 1943, 8 percent of the Red Army of the Soviet Union was consisting of women who had fought and were known as the Second Front. The Second front consisted of medics and supply and logistic operatives and was often considered for a frontal combat. The Soviet women, were particularly suited for the partisan work near the beginning of the war, because of their agility and speed, were used as scouts and

messengers and it was during this phase that women became openly involved in the war and involved in taking up arms. A total of 28,500 women became partisans representing 9.8 percent of the total partisans' forces (Engel 2004).

On 9th June 1944, as part of the first wave of assaults, the partisan units began their systematic assault on the web of German communications, they managed to destroy 1000 transports and cripple the German supply and redeployment systems. (Overy 1998)

On the ground, the Soviet Union, deployed women snipers, the Soviets believed that women would be good snipers as they were patient, deliberate and normally avoided hand to hand combat. Some famous snipers of the Soviet Union included Nina Alexeyevna Lobkovskaya and the Ukrainian Lyudmila Paylichenko killed around 300 Germans soldiers (Alexievich 1985). The women who were involved in the ground operations not only served as medics or snipers, they were also known to serve as communications personnel and officers.

Though in small numbers, there were also women who served as machine gunners and tank drivers, one famous machine gunner was Manshuk Mametova; she was also the first Soviet Asian woman to receive the highest award of the Soviet Union, the Hero of the Soviet Union for her acts of bravery. (Alexievich 1985). There was also a battalion of female soldiers who used heavy machine guns to protect Kiev in 1941.

Two more women who were awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union were Mariya Oktyabrskaya and Ukrainian Alexandra Samusenko both who were tank drivers during the war. Women were deployed in the anti-aircraft batteries, the majority of the anti-aircraft batteries in the region of Stalingrad were operated by women. (Alexievich 1985).

By the year 1945, there were about 246,000 women from the Soviet Union in uniform who fought for their motherland; there have been some claims that over the course of the war, 70 percent of the 800,000 Soviet women who served in the Soviet Union served at some point of time in the frontline of the war (Overy 1998). The presence of the women battalion in the Red Army and also the contribution of the women in the Red Air Forces for the Soviet Union made a considerable difference in the amount of effort and force with which the Soviet Union was able to hold off the Hitler German Army from invading the Soviet Union for the majority of the war in the Eastern Front.

Conclusion

Women of any country ranging from the United States of America to the Soviet Union played an important role during the war. The role that the women played in the Second World War cannot be discredited by any individual, be it in the frontlines of the conflict or in the home front ranging from the use of the machinery to the role played by the women in the field of medicine, industry and the occupation of jobs by women which were left by the men to go to the battlefield.

Though there has been great contributions, by the women in the war, there has been only one country that has openly supported the involvement of women in the battlefield was the Soviet Union, became a pioneer for most countries when its women were involved in the war and it brought dividend when the Soviet women played an important role in the victory of the allies and protecting the Eastern Front. At the same time, it was an important victory for the female population against the patriarchal notion of war, by standing up and setting an example for the rest of the world to follow in the Soviet Union footsteps.

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