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Kazimiera J. Cottam, ed. *Women In Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II.* Nepean, Canada: New Military Publishing, 1997. 313 pp. $20.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9682702-1-9.

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Her Weapon Was an Aircraft

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The Soviet Armed Forces, in dire need of flyers at the beginning of World War II, opened its ranks to young women who eagerly welcomed the opportunity to serve their country as pilots. The fifty-five women whose biographies are edited and translated in Dr. Cottam's thorough and well-documented collection contributed significantly to the Allied effort. These anonymous women demonstrated skill and courage as they flew vintage craft (some World War I biplanes) on night and dive bombing and fighter missions.

Pilot/navigator Marina Raskova, awarded the honorific Hero of the Soviet Union (HSU, highest military honor) for establishing critical Soviet air routes in 1938, organized three flying regiments during the war. One was the 586th Fighter Regiment; flying Yak-1s, the regiment completed 4,419 missions with 125 dogfights and 38 aircraft strikes. The 587th Dive Bomber Regiment, piloting Pe(Petlyakov)-2s, flew 1,134 missions and dropped 980,000 tons of bombs. The Pe-2 was regarded as difficult to control particularly on one engine. The 588th Night Bombers flew 24,000 operational sorties in the Po(Polikarpov)-2. This particular craft, though stable and STOL capable, was plywood and percale with no radio nor adequate navigational equipment and a speed of 100-120 km/h.

Captain M. Dolina, bomber pilot, wrote (p. 42), "Our ammunition exhausted, we were descending. One Messerschmitt caught up with us and approached very closely from the port side. The pilot's face was clearly visible; he raised one finger then two. I did not know what he meant. It was later explained that he was asking me a question. How was I to be shot down? On the first or second pass?"

Twenty-eight women from these three regiments were awarded the title of HSU. Many personal and insightful memoirs are presented. A mechanic recounted (p. 150), " Rain-soaked ground made take-offs impossible so we constructed a wood platform 200 by 30 meters. TOLs were in one direction regardless of the wind. The craft stood in the mud; then an order '1, 2, heave' and we would drag the machine onto the boards. At night when the soil froze, the skids would break, about 20 per night. We did this for three years." A pilot remembered (p. 146), "In April 1944, we advanced westward and led a gypsy life, full of joys and hardships. Each night we slept under the wings of our aircraft. A caring mechanic would taxi the craft in such a way to ensure a small elevation under the wing. Such hillocks kept us dry when it rained. The mechanic would curtain off the windward side with the cockpit cover and bustle around the engine gently tapping wrenches so as not to disturb the sleeping crew."

Most of these accounts were written by the women themselves shortly after the War. Some were taken from diaries kept during the War by those who perished; others were written in tribute to the fallen. Although an engaging read, an English-speaking reader may struggle with Russian names (first, last, married and all combinations thereof). There are rare, awkward idiomatic translations, e.g. a type of head injury or concussion translates as 'being concussed'. This unique collection of memoirs is a 'must read' for those interested in World War II as well as aviation and the roles of female aviators. About one million women served in the Soviet Armed Forces during World War II. This unique record in the East deserves to be read in the West. Readers will finish this book and ask, "Why? Why did we not know of these women?"

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