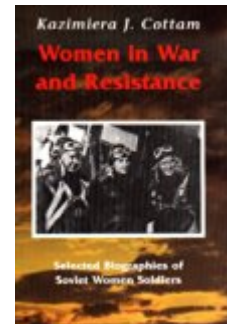


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kazimiera J. Cottam. *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers*. Nepean, Canada: New Military Publishing, 1998. 451 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9682702-2-6.

Reviewed by Lance Janda (Independent Researcher)
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Distaff Defense of the Eastern Front

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It is a common misconception that access of Soviet women to military service in World War II was a function of a political and socio-economic environment that fostered emancipation of women in the workplace. This is not the case; there was simply a shortage of men to meet the needs of the Soviet Armed Forces. Women were drafted to perform auxiliary or defensive duties (target towing, mine clearing) and they advanced despite, rather than because of, official policy that maintained women by nature were intended to nourish rather than kill.

Dr. Cottam's documentation of the lives of ninety-four Soviet women who served in the air, on land and at sea as pilots, snipers, tank commanders, partisans, medics, scouts, and secret agents presents the human dimension of war. She details the scope and the importance of the contributions of these 'typical' Russian women. Their biographies are presented in two sections. One is Heroes of the Soviet Union (airwomen, infantry and tank troops, medical personnel, and resistance fighters).[1] The second is Recipients of the Order of Glory I Class (medical noncoms, snipers, machine and air gunners). Select Civil War heroines are introduced in the appendix.

Pilot Lidya Litvyak was the first woman to shoot down an enemy aircraft; she died an ace fighter pilot days before her 22nd birthday. Machine gunner Man-shuk Mametova was the first woman of the Soviet East to be awarded Hero of the Soviet Union (HSU). Medic

Vera Kashcheyeva was one of the first women to receive the Nightingale Award from the International Red Cross. One quarter of the Soviet female armed forces was decorated for valor in combat.

Inadequate training notwithstanding, the sub-standard equipment (planes, tanks, and weapons) provided these young women and the conditions under which they performed are unimaginable by any standards. The Po-2 flown by the Night Bombers had a wind-screen like a motorcycle with little protection against the wind and the cold. They were flown in total darkness without lights and reference points. German pilots referred to the night bomber regiment as 'Night Witches' and received an Iron Cross for every Po-2 they shot down.

Although it was believed women had the qualities required of snipers (endurance, patience, shooting skill and precision), it was generally held that they were not physiologically equipped to become military or even civilian pilots. At the war's end, the vast majority of these women returned to civilian, and largely female, occupations. Military ranks dropped from one million to less than ten thousand; these were principally nurses and phone operators. Despite their stellar aviation success in the war, by 1988 (with approximately 24,000 female military pilots in the United States) there were very few Soviet female military pilots.

The wealth of information provided through Dr. Cottam's exhaustive research is of genuine value and interest for a myriad audience-history, aviation, military stud-

ies, and women's studies. This book is an engaging, humane and personal account of a fascinating, courageous, anonymous and uncelebrated group of Soviet patriots who just happened to be women.

[1]. Valentina Tereshkova, astronaut, and Svetlana Savitskaya, pilot/astronaut, were awarded the HSU for their post-war service. As of May 1990, ninety-five Soviet women had been awarded the HSU (p. xxii).

Note

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