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[Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War, by Roger D.  
Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona.](#)

*Comparativ: Zeitschrift für globalgeschichte und vergleichende  
gesellschaftsforschung* 2013, 23(4/5), 232-234.

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**Journal website:**

<http://research.uni-leipzig.de/comparativ/>

**Date deposited:**

03/08/2016

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Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, xxii, 305 p, ISBN 978023057952-1, 60.00 GBP.

Between 1941 and 1945 over a million women saw military service in the Red Army and partisan units. This excellent book tells the story of the participation of these women in a genocidal and misogynist war of unprecedented scale and violence. Roger Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona weave together an analysis of state policy towards women in military service, with a social and cultural history of the everyday experience of life and death on the frontlines. The book's central objective is to explain how and why so many Soviet women came to be on the frontlines of this brutal conflict, and why they fought for the repressive Stalinist regime. This is counterbalanced by exploring the popular experience of military service: the everyday hardships, shortages, frustrations, uncertainties and risks of women's military service. In addressing these areas the book makes important contributions to the understanding of Soviet women's participation in modern industrialized warfare, the nature of the Stalinist state, and women's place within wider society.

For readers familiar with the history of other fronts and armies during the Second World War, there will be much that is unfamiliar and surprising about the history of Soviet women's military service. However, the study of Soviet women in the Red Army and partisan organizations is not uncharted territory. Anna Krylova, for example, has explored how the presence of Soviet women on the frontlines reshaped notions of gender. Her book focuses on many of the same exemplary personalities as this study, albeit with different conclusions.[1] Roger Reese has devoted two chapters of a recent book exploring the Red Army's military effectiveness to charting the historical precedents for, motivations and experience of female soldiers. Reese, like the authors of the present study, asks why so many women fought for such a repressive regime.[2] These works, and several others, are briefly referenced in the introduction. But the book would have benefitted from a more detailed historiographical frame of reference, against which to contextualise its research findings.

The principal value of this book lays in its comprehensive approach. While there have been authoritative studies of particular branches of female military service, such as Reina Pennington's excellent study of Soviet airwomen[3], no other book captures the full diversity and complexity of Soviet women's military participation. Women fulfilled a bewildering array of combat, technical and ancillary roles within the Red Army and partisan forces, which are explored in remarkable detail. Chapters are devoted to the frontline experiences of: nurses, pilots especially the all-female 'night-witches' bomber regiment), partisans, the Women's Volunteer Rifle Brigade and snipers. Other chapters explore the formative experiences of the female 'frontline generation', the initial surge of female volunteers in the summer of 1941, the mass mobilization of women into the military in the spring and autumn of 1942, and finally the traumatic aftermath of frontline military service. This structure allows the chronological shifts in official policy to be charted alongside a narrative of the rich variety of female military experience.

“Soviet Women on the Frontline” is based on an impressive range of source material. The official history of the mobilization of Soviet women is told through a mixture of published sources, particularly newspapers, and documents from the Komsomol archive. These materials highlight the Komsomol’s central role in encouraging, channelling and in certain circumstances coercing female military participation. The authors marshal a wealth of personal testimony, including diaries, letters, memoirs and interviews to tell women’s stories. Large parts of the text are devoted to sustained analysis of frontline experiences in women’s own voices. Some of these vignettes discuss well known women, such as the aviators Marina Raskova and Irina Rakobolskaya, and the sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko, familiar from the existing literature. Others are less familiar. Indeed the authors commissioned Artem Drabkin, of the ‘I Remember’ website to conduct a number of additional interviews.[4] This website is developing into an increasingly valuable academic resource, used by a number of researchers including Roger Reese. These sources are supplemented by evidence from visual sources, film and literature.

What emerges over the book’s nine chapters is a fascinating picture of popular patriotic enthusiasm, official condescension towards women, and remarkable heroism in the face of enormous obstacles. Soviet education, propaganda and socialization fostered a sense of entitlement to military service amongst a generation of young women. The impulse to serve was repeatedly frustrated by the state’s and the military’s reluctance to embrace women in the military. The mass mobilization of women was steadfastly resisted until the spring of 1942, when the disastrous losses experienced by the Red Army forced a policy change. It was, however, “never the intention of the Soviet state to deploy women en masse on the frontlines, let alone for women to become professional soldiers [...]” (p.180). Women always served within strict limits. The exemplary pilots, snipers and partisans celebrated in Soviet propaganda were the exception. Most women were consigned to mundane roles, designed to free men up for combat. Military service was a disappointment for many women, achieved in the face of official scepticism, pervasive male discrimination, and even abuse. “The divorce between Soviet rhetoric about women’s equality and the reality of daily life for women in the belligerently masculine Red Army [...]” (p.201) was striking. By 1944, once the tide of war had turned, women’s opportunities for frontline service became even more restricted, further feeding women’s disillusionment. The betrayal of Soviet women’s patriotic enthusiasm continued beyond May 1945. Few women were able to carve out a permanent military career. Regardless of gender veterans found the transition to civilian life difficult, but former servicewomen faced additional barriers. Many were treated with disdain or contempt, and were the victims of viscous rumours about their wartime sexual conduct. Markwick and Charon Cardona conclude that Soviet women’s sense of entitlement to fight alongside men did not in the long run challenge gender norms. Soviet women fought first and foremost as patriots faced by an extraordinary threat. Their feminist demands were secondary and by contemporary standards rather conventional.

“Soviet Women on the Frontlines” is a well written and painstakingly researched study. It peers behind the sanitized and saccharine official Soviet narrative of women at war, to reveal a complicated and often disturbing analysis of women’s military involvement. Soviet history specialists will find much of interest in this fascinating book. But it also deserves a wider audience. Scholars with an interest in the comparative history of women and warfare, or the global history of the Second World War, will find this an accessible and authoritative case study of the most extreme example of women’s military participation in the twentieth century.

## Notes

[1] Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat. A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*, Cambridge, 2010.

[2] Roger R. Reese, *Why Stalin's Soldiers Fought. The Red Army's Military Effectiveness in World War II*, Lawrence, 2011, pp. 257-305.

[3] Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*, Lawrence, 2001.

[4] I Remember Website, <http://iremember.ru/> (last accessed 21 February 2013).

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