SHE FOUGHT FOR THE FATHERLAND: GENDER, WAR AND MEMORY IN THE SOVIET UNION

By Dr. Kitty Lam, History/Social Science Faculty
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Discuss:

“Warfare is...the one human activity...from which women have always and everywhere stood apart. Women...do not fight...and they never in any military sense, fight men.”

Timeline: WWII and the USSR

- Sept. 1, 1941: Germany invades Poland
- Sept. 17, 1941: Soviet invasion of Poland
- June 22, 1941: Germany invades USSR
- Sept. 8, 1941: “Siege of Leningrad” begins
- Sept. 1941-Spring 1942: Battle of Moscow
- July 1942-February 1943: Battle of Stalingrad
- January 1944: Siege of Leningrad ends
- April-May 1945: Soviet offensive against Berlin
Soviet Women in the Great Patriotic War

- 820,000 women served in the armed forces
- Mostly involved in the Eastern Front
- Most served in noncombatant roles: truck drivers, radio operators, medics, nurses
- 120,000 served in combat roles: snipers, anti-aircraft gunners, bomber pilots, machine gunners, and other ground combat roles
- Note: figures above do NOT include women who served in the thousands of partisan units or women who served in civilian defense units
  - Partisans: resistances units that engaged in guerilla warfare against German forces
Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad
August 21, 1941: Everyone is crowding around the announcements pasted up on the walls. This is an appeal made by Marshal Voroshilov and our Leningrad Soviet. It is two months since the Germans crossed the frontier and some say it will be a miracle if they are halted now. Well, we must achieve this miracle with our hands. My colleagues at the bank and I were sent out to help build the antitank defense works and Elizaveta, my wife, went with me. It is certainly hard for her to dig deep holes and then set logs in them, but she is cheerful and full of good spirit.
Poet Anna Akhmatova, radio broadcast speech, September 1941

“Mothers, wives and sisters of Leningrad. For more than a month now the enemy has been threatening our city with capture and inflicting severe wounds on it. … Like all of you, I only live by my unshakable faith that Leningrad will never bow down to the Nazis. This faith is made stronger when I see the women of Leningrad defending the city with such simple velour and enabling ordinary human existence to continue. Our descendants will pay tribute to every mother of the time of the Patriotic War, but particularly so to the woman of Leningrad who stands on the roof during an air raid, watching for the incendiaries; to a Leningrad volunteer-nurse helping the wounded among the ruins of a burning house…. No, a city which has raised such women cannot be vanquished.
A Soviet school girl on the scene in Leningrad after the Siege, autumn of 1944:

“When I came home from class later than usual, I often saw columns of German POWs marching down Lesnoy Avenue... Everyday, at the same evening hour, the same scene repeated itself. Endless columns of prisoners were led down Lesnoy Avenue. And, as if by some invisible sign, people emerged from nowhere to watch...All these people had survived the Blockade. Most of them were middle-aged women—but then all women, except the twenty-year-olds (and sometimes they too) seem middle aged. Men were nowhere to be seen, except a rare old man or a cripple from the front.
From School Girl to War Hero

- Zoia Kosmodemianskaia
- Joint a special forces partisan unit as a scout in 1941, at age 18
- Captured by Nazis in November 1941 while conducting an operation near Moscow
- Executed on November 29, 1941
Zoia Kosmodemianskaia – Last Minutes Before Execution
Monument to Zoia

- Partisanskaia Metro Station, Moscow
- “Dedicated to the legendary partisan-scout, hero of the Soviet Union Zoia Kosmodemianskaia, who died on November 29, 1941 in defense of Moscow”
- Artist: Matvei Manizer
- Unveiled October 1942
Mother Russia Calls
Poster: The Motherland Calls You! (1941)

Artist: Iraklii Toidze

Wartime propaganda poster calling men to military service
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