Introduction

Military historian John Keegan wrote, “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” (John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, 76). Yet in the Second World War, an estimated 120,000 Soviet women served in combat roles. This lesson uses wartime photographs of Soviet women and images of Soviet war monuments and to help students reconsider wartime division of gender roles. It also prompts students to examine how women’s contributions to war were actually commemorated in a country that championed gender equality.

**Grade Level:** 6-12

**Relevant Topics/Course Units:** WWII, Gender, Soviet Union, social memory

**Duration:** 45-70 minutes

**Notes and Talking Points for PowerPoint Slide Show**

**Slide 2: “We Can Do It!” Poster**

Soviet history is unfamiliar to most students, so this lesson plan starts with an image from an American history context to ease students into discussion. Many students will already be familiar with the “We Can Do It!” poster. Originally an advertisement displayed at factories of the Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing company to encourage women to take wartime jobs in defense industries, this poster eventually became associated with the song “Rosie the Riveter.”

**Guiding Questions:**
• What is the woman in the poster actually doing?
• What message is this poster sending about the role of women in the U.S. war effort?

**Slide 3: Keegan’s statement**

Ask the students to consider this statement. Do they agree or disagree with it? Is that statement applicable to warfare today?

• Students might also use this prompt to discuss the role of women in the U.S. military, for example, the decision in 2015 to open all combat positions to women. See link: [http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/12/03/458319524/pentagon-will-allow-women-in-frontline-ground-combat-positions](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/12/03/458319524/pentagon-will-allow-women-in-frontline-ground-combat-positions)
• For longer classes, students can also do research on other countries that formally allow women to participate in all combat roles. See link: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/01/25/map-which-countries-allow-women-in-front-line-combat-roles/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/01/25/map-which-countries-allow-women-in-front-line-combat-roles/)
Slide 4 & 5: Brief background on the Soviet Union during WWII
- Emphasize that for much of the war, Soviet armed forces did the fighting on Soviet territory
- Additional details to emphasize:
  - The Soviet Union was unprepared for war because the government’s attempts to cleanse the Communist Party of enemies during the 1930s removed many competent military officials from leadership
  - The Soviet leadership signed the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact with the German government to gain more time to prepare for war against multiple opponents.
  - When Germany broke the pact in 1941 and invaded the Soviet Union, many Soviet citizens were caught by surprise because the leadership had downplayed the threat of German invasion in the preceding months.
- Additional details on the Siege of Leningrad
  - The 900-day siege began in September 1941 when German forces seized the city’s supply lines to Moscow and bombarded targets in and around the city.
  - The Germans’ objective was to force the city to surrender by terrorizing and starving the city’s inhabitants.
  - In the winter of 1941-42, the Germans had cut off the city from the rest of the country. The only way to supply the city was through the frozen Lake Ladoga northeast of the city.
  - By that point, many of the city’s men had already been conscripted into military service and sent to the frontlines. The remainder of the city’s able-bodied adults – including many women – were mobilized for civilian defense.

Slides 8-11: Images from the Siege of Leningrad
- Ask students to study the images: Who is featured in each image? What are the people doing? Where are the men in the pictures? Where are the women in the pictures? Focus on women specifically – what do you think their experiences were like?

Slides 12-14: Primary source accounts of the Siege of Leningrad
- Ask students to read some of these accounts and discuss the role of women as described in these accounts. How do these accounts compare to the images you saw in slides 8-11?

Slides 15-16: Images of the Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad
- Plans to build this monument started in the late 1950s. For more details, see [http://www.saint-petersburg.com/monuments/heroic-defenders/](http://www.saint-petersburg.com/monuments/heroic-defenders/)
- Ask students to study the images of this monument. Who is featured in each section of the monument? What are the men doing? What are the women doing?
- Question: How do the descriptions of women’s activities during the Siege of Leningrad, as well as the images of women’s activities in slides 8-11 differ from the image of women portrayed in the Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad from slides 15-16

Slide 17-19: Zoia Kosmodemianskaia
- These slides refer to Zoia Kosmodemianskaia, an 18 year-old Soviet school girl living near Moscow who volunteered for service in a partisan unit in 1941. She was a scout who operated behind enemy lines. She was captured by the Germans and executed in 1941 in a public hanging. Zoia’s story became prime material for Soviet wartime propaganda on the cruelty of the German soldiers. Soviet officials also used Zoia’s story as an example of youthful heroism.
- The 1943 statue of her depicts her in masculine attire. The inscription on the statue refers to her heroic acts as a partisan scout.
• Post-war memorials to Zoia (not pictured in the slide show) depict Zoia in more feminine form. They refer not so much to her specific acts as a member of a partisan unit, but to her martyrdom.

Slide 20-21: War monument in Volgograd
• Ask students to comment on how the female figure is portrayed in the statue in Slide 20. Then ask students to comment on the depiction of male and female figures in slide 21. (Figure 1 – What is the male figure doing in comparison to what the Mother Russia figure is doing? Figure 2 – What is the female figure doing? How does that compare to the actual Mother Russia statue?)

Slide 22: Wartime Propaganda Poster
• The image of the woman depicted in this wartime propaganda poster was source for the Mother Russia statue at the Stalingrad memorial. Ask students to consider what emotions that poster was meant to evoke during the war.

Concluding Thoughts
• Students should be able to conclude that Soviet post-war commemoration of women’s roles in the war did not completely match the entire reality of women’s experiences. There were 120,000 women who participated in direct combat positions in the Soviet armed. The images from the Siege of Leningrad and personal accounts of the Siege show that women did indeed do some of the fighting during the war. War memorials are seldom dedicated to women, and where war memorials do incorporate women, they depict women as mourners and caregivers, and rarely as fighters. Female imagery in war memorials appeals to a broader sense of motherhood, and to the notion of defending the mother’s honor. This reflects a tension in Soviet views of women’s roles during WWII.
• For students in more advanced levels, it may be appropriate to discuss Soviet ideology on gender in general. The mixed messages about women’s wartime contributions is particularly striking because the Soviet state, in theory, championed gender equality in a patriarchal society. Bolshevik decrees in 1917 abolished church control of marriage and gave women the right to get divorced without anyone else’s permission. The Zhenotdel (Women’s Section of the Communist Party) was established in 1919 to address issues concerning women’s welfare. A law in 1920 legalized abortion, and a new law in 1926 made it even easier for women to get a divorce. Women were encouraged and expected to contribute to the industrial work force. The state also established nurseries and maternity homes to support women in the domestic sphere. Educational programs also aimed to improve women’s literacy. However, Soviet legislation under Stalin’s leadership once again reinforced more patriarchal values. For example, laws in 1936 abolished abortion and re-established some restrictions on divorce. Soviet views on gender became increasingly contradictory after the post-war years. On the one hand, legislation in 1954 repealed the ban on abortions, but on the other hand, public discourse characterized women in more traditional female roles. The appeal to motherhood in war monuments created after the war may in fact be symptomatic of this discord between prioritizing women’s emancipation and reinforcing patriarchal values.
Bibliography and Additional Resources

Books


Journal Articles


Website

*Seventeen Moments in Soviet History: An Online Archive of Primary Sources.*