

Lipstick and Beauty Contests: Female Soldiers in Russia¹

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Abstract

The number of female soldiers in the Russian Army has increased enormously since 1992 from 2% to almost 15 % of the total force at the present time. Women gain ground in the Russian military at a time when the military is no longer an attractive institution for men in Russia. In this paper, I discuss on the one hand how the military and public discourse concerning female soldiers works and argue that this situation is characterized by a crisis of military masculinity and a conflict-ridden national reorganization in Russia. On the other hand, I describe the self-images of female soldiers. The analysis is based on interviews with female soldiers. They reveal that for Russian female soldiers, cultural constructions of femininity are a means of helping them to keep a stand in a male dominated environment. Discourses on natural differences between men and women are used to legitimate their own positions and interests within the organization.

Introduction

Since the end of the East-West conflict we have witnessed all-embracing transformation processes in the post-socialist countries. Profound social and political changes are linked to cultural transformations, including gender relations. Such transformations are manifested not only in altered self-concepts of women and men, but they also influence social relations within institutions. This article examines such transformations in one significant institution: the military. It concentrates on new formulations of military gender politics and women's inclusion into the armed forces after the end of the East-West conflict, a topic which still remains under-researched. This, in itself, is surprising, as it is an issue related to two political fields that were central to and characteristic of social development in socialist countries. Firstly, female inclusion in the military was related to the militarization of all social spheres, and, secondly, it contributed to promoting women's equality (Eifler, 2009). There is wide political agreement among researchers and politicians that maintaining a military, as well as the corresponding political structure of society impeded development in

the socialist countries. At the same time, although state equality policies supported women in their aspirations to be both economically active and mothers, the central fields of employment remained essentially masculine in character. Access to military positions, similar to access to positions of responsibility in politics and economics, was extremely limited. At the end of the East-West conflict, there were women in the national military units of the socialist countries, but their number was low and the professional spheres open to them were seriously restricted. The new state consolidation after the collapse of social state systems pressured the armed forces to both democratise and modernise (Ulrich, 2000; Herspring, 2002). The shifts in the established military gender ideology formed part of these transformation processes. At their core they represented the end of male dominance of military service and the associated loss of privileges. It must be noted that the integration of women into national militaries in western countries, especially in the USA, contributed to the rapid opening of the armed forces to women in post-socialist countries. In order to meet criteria for inclusion in western organisations and alliances new member states had to conform to inclusive policies, such as accepting women into the military. Thus, the number of women in military service has increased quickly in a short time period and this rapid transformation forms the basis for this paper.

The expansion of NATO and EU integration play a particular role in this process of female integration. Despite observable national differences in the numbers of women in the military and approaches to the integration of women,³ it is nevertheless evident that the integration of women in the newly acceded post-socialist countries involves particular modifications in culturally shared beliefs about masculinity and femininity as well as about the military as a male institution (Eifler, 2009). They are often employed in combat support units and sometimes also in the characteristically male-masculine combat units. Full access to military occupations for women has been granted in Hungary (1996), Poland (2003), and Slovenia (2002) (Women admittance, 2009). Such developments have taken place on a background of changes in the tasks and scope of armed forces. Since the end of the Cold War the national armies are no longer responsible only for national defence, but to a great extent it participates in international missions outside of its own territory.

This article deals with the contradictory process of women's integration into the armed forces using the example of Russia. Being a member neither of NATO nor of the EU, Russia – as a former military and political world power – has initiated transformations in the military after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The opening up of the military to women also belongs to such transformations. The Russian government permitted women to join the army

as early as 1991 and in a short time it achieved immense growth rates. Since then, female soldiers' contributions to military efficiency have been emphasized by both military and political actors. Since the transformation process began, the female soldiers have been engaged in various professional fields and they have asserted themselves in the characteristically masculine military. However, images of female soldiers contradict the reality of such changes. In military events, parades and in the military media, female soldiers are not characterized by their professional contributions to the armed forces. Instead, an ambivalent and offensive reduction of female soldiers to their femininity dominates the discourse. Beauty Contests and competitions for "Miss"-nominations play an especially significant role in the military life. Military media participate in the organization of such contests and continually accompany them, disseminating information about the female soldier-contestants and, especially, nominees' pictures.

This article attempts to clarify this ambivalence. The first part focuses on historical discourses about armed and fighting women in World War II. The struggle against National Socialism played a considerable role both for national self-awareness and individual discourses. It demonstrated that after the war women's military contribution was not engraved in historical memory to the same extent as that of men. The second part analyses the integration policies of military leadership in the last decade. This includes both the issue of how the military has been integrating women into what has traditionally been an all-male environment and the steps taken to cope with problems that arise from such integration. The third part of this article outlines a number of military discourses about women as soldiers.

Historical Discourses

The image of a female soldier has a long tradition in Russia and it has been prevalent as a cultural pattern in public consciousness over generations. After 1918, education and training in 'defence' was mandatory and legally regulated in the Soviet Union for both men and women. The idea of an all-embracing mobilisation of the population for the country's defence was based on the principle that both genders should be able to protect and to defend their country. Many women volunteered to fight in the civil war that followed the October Revolution of 1917. They fought in separate combat units. However, in the course of reduction and reorganization of the army in 1923 all female soldiers were dismissed from the military (Seidler, 1998). The idea of the general arming of the population was revoked and compulsory military service was limited to male citizens. Starting in 1927, numerous

communities were established⁴ in which women and girls, together with men, were educated in civil defence, motor sports and aviation, signals communication, parachute jumping, customs services, using small arms, sharp shooting, chemical warfare, and tank manoeuvres. In these organizations women obtained military knowledge, which helped them fight for their national interests against fascism through World War II.

In World War II the number of women in the Red Army reached 800,000. To some extent, they forced the representatives of the Red Army to recognize them and insisted on fighting for the national cause alongside the men. Altogether more than one million women took part at the front, in the rear, and in the partisan detachments; 100,000 of them were decorated during the war years (Seidler, 1998:352). From the beginning of the war women were trained in highly skilled occupations in many fields in order to compensate for the losses of male personnel. Women regained the right to handle weapons and to fight. In spite of all prejudices, women soldiers fought at the front in many different army sectors. In 1942 Stalin yielded to pressure from female pilots and gave his consent for the formation of three battalions of female combat pilots. They earned legendary fame for their impressive success despite technically deficient equipment. Furthermore, women supported the Red Army as laundresses, cooks and in other functions. In the rear, millions of women took men's positions in all the social fields along with their other daily family tasks.

The experience of female soldiers at the front was extremely contradictory. From the very beginning they had to assert themselves against massive reservations on the part of the fighting men. Regular officers doubted that the "weaker sex" could master the trade of war. A detachment commander of a woman's machine-gun division says that he endured the deployment of female soldiers with much scepticism:

Not all of them coped with the discipline; the nature of a woman defies military severity. Once one forgot what task she had been assigned to, another time, another one received a letter from home and wept the whole morning.
(Alexejewitsch, 1989: 97)

At the outbreak of the war, public statements designed to mobilize women for the wartime economy emphasised attributes such as strength, independence and capability to carry out "men's work." During the war symbolic attributions changed in public presentations. Images of feminine women – entrusted with typical female household activities – and a discourse declaring family duties as woman's "natural" destiny rapidly replaced the

previous ones (Köbberling, 2001:23). The new family law of 1941 summoned women to bear more children. Women who had many children received “medals for motherhood,” and women with 10 or more children became “mother-heroines.” The law aimed at eradication of concubinages and it significantly impeded divorces (Ibid.)

The self-image of female soldiers was strongly shaped by contradictory reference frameworks within which the relations between women and the army developed. Women themselves perceived the war as contradictory to a woman’s nature. Embroidery, sewing, hair dyeing, hairdressing, and embellishing were activities at the front:

We have tremendously missed such woman’s type of work, we searched for any excuse to take a needle in our hands. One wanted to return at least shortly to her nature. (Alexejewitsch, 1989: 81)

The military victory over Fascism strongly shaped the national self-awareness. By the end of World War II, female soldiers experienced a contradictory symbolic exploitation. The heroic military deeds of women became an ambivalent part of the collective memory: on the one hand, female soldiers were symbolically associated with military success; on the other hand, their accomplishments remained socially unrecognized and unaccepted.⁵ Women did not receive the same pension and social support as their fellow male combatants. Although the state used the contribution of women as soldiers as propaganda to secure peace in the USSR, this contribution was, nonetheless, never evaluated or analysed in a scholarly way as an autonomous issue for scholastic inquiry.⁶ Women’s role in the war can still be traced back only through accounts of some individual fates, through interviews or memoirs. While a few women were symbolically praised and decorated with many medals for their roles as combatants in public political events, they stood in contrast to the numerous embittered and impoverished women. Many of them regard their achievements in the war and their war experience as not verbally expressible and as undermining their status as women. Thus, concerns expressed to Alexejewitsch in an interview with a former female soldier were about fears of being wounded in body parts that might be perceived as important for women:

Through the whole war time I feared that my legs could suffer. I had beautiful legs. For a man, it does not that much matter if his leg falls apart in pieces after a fired shot! But when it happens to a woman, she is doomed.
(Alexijewitsch, 1989: 154)

Not only did women report about longing for “womanly behaviour” in their daily war routine, but they also reported feeling devalued as women by their former deployment to the front. Many women concealed their participation in military missions and celebrated commemoration days privately in the circle of their former fellow female combatants – in blatant contrast to male public rituals that took the form of “veterans of the Great Patriotic War” meetings. One female officer says:

[We] told nobody that we were combatants in the front. We maintained connections between ourselves, writing letters and other such things. Later they started to celebrate us, but at the beginning we kept quiet. We did not wear our medals. The men wore medals; they were winners, heroes and desirable bachelors. They were the ones who fought the war, but we were looked at in a different way. (Alexejewitsch, 1989: 92)

In general, the war experiences did not lead to emancipatory feelings or new opportunities for women in the public sphere; but these experiences – within a governmentally managed framework of socialist “women’s issues” – were indicative of the contradictory strategies used to define a feminised woman’s role. It was also reflected to a large extent in evaluations of women’s war experiences. For example, female participants in the war recounted that postings to the front were reproached as being an excuse for frivolous love affairs.⁷ Furthermore, ambivalent self-perceptions on the part of female soldiers contributed to this circumstance: front-line encounters and exposures to the violence of war were experienced as “defeminisation” and seen as inhibiting a return to the “normal” woman’s role in civilian life. Women felt incapable of starting a family. The proximity to men-fighters deprived them – in their own view – of their “femininity.” One woman, who fought in combat, felt herself masculinised, in contrast to her former self-image as a naïve romantic girl (Alexejewitsch, 1989: 137). This image was used by many women to describe themselves before their entry into the war. The interpretation of this change as a loss of female status did not allow for the consideration of wider social recognition for female soldiers –as opposed to that of their male counterparts.

At the end of World War II almost all women were demobilised from the Red Army; in 1959 there were only 659 women employed in the army (Seidler, 1998). In the following years only a few women joined the army. They acted as interpreters, political education

officers, doctors, and, in some rare cases, as staff officers. Women obtained permission to serve in the military on a voluntary basis only when they were unmarried and had no children and they were forbidden to marry during their active service time. Because the Army did not provide any professional education for them, women took part in only basic military training courses; as a consequence access to the military academy for women was also denied. According to available data, before the collapse of the USSR in 1990 there were only 10,000 women in the Red Army, thus, only 0.5% of the military personnel (Seidler, 1998:357). Although some had graduated from higher technical educational institutions, these military women were mainly employed as stokers or in other unskilled fields (Eifler/Opitz, 1993). The military remained distinctly male in character and an important institution of socialisation for men in the Soviet Union. Women were destined for the supporting role of wife to a professional soldier and the mother of his children.

Current Changes and Female Soldiers' Experience

Since the beginning of the 1990s, amidst conditions of deep crisis which enveloped the state, the nation and the military's sense of masculinity, the Russian state began admitting women into the army. Economic difficulties, debates about military and political reorientation, and public disclosure of the unacceptable living and employment conditions contributed significantly to a further worsening of the army's image, already tarnished by the collapse of the USSR. For professional soldiers a secure lifetime job which had been socially privileged and highly valued in society, turned into an insecure, vague prospect. The salary became small and irregular. Increasingly fewer men desired a military career. Furthermore, young men could avoid the traditionally obligatory military service by buying themselves out through illegal payment to officials. The army faced significant problems in attracting new recruits.

Since the mid-1990s military reform has aimed at the modernization of the armed forces. This process includes reduction of the armed forces, improvements in the field of education and of military training. An improvement of social and material situation of soldiers is also envisaged. So far only a few such plans were partially realized (Herspring, 2002). Nonetheless, the military reform has opened up new occupational opportunities for women. Amongst these are administration, logistics, educational occupations, medical care, communication fields and correspondence.

A powerful sign of the further integration process of women was the abolition of some discriminatory regulations from the times of the Soviet Union. For example, beginning in 1989 the military granted women the right to maternity leave and the right to return to their previous work responsibilities as soon as a child is in a day-care (Rykov, 2005). Before, only unmarried women and those with no children could be employed in the army.

Although women start their work in mixed units, they can be employed only in special non-combat institutions as volunteers on a contract basis (*kontrakniki*). Different reasons influence women's interest to enter the army. Many such women come from military families and they highly respect the army. Some other women are attracted by social benefits: free public transportation access, support in search of reasonably priced living spaces, work based on the contract in contrast to one rooted in free economics. Their contracts last from two to five years, while service contracts for men are for 15-20 years. The difference in contract duration exemplifies that men's employment is seen as a professional life prospect; for women it remains only a temporary option. Thus women can be more quickly discharged from the military in contrast to men. The women – as university graduates or degree holders from a technical institute – often are better qualified academically than their male counterparts but they hardly ever have a military school education.

The military leadership has unanimously declared to women that the armed forces need them strongly. Female soldiers are praised by the high ranking officers. On March 8, 2009, International Women's Day, Defence Minister Serdyukov emphasized that female soldiers have made a positive impact on the military with their "punctuality, sacrificing, sense of responsibility and professionalism" (Serdyukov, 2009:2). President Medvedev also expressed his approval and announced acknowledgement and stipulated the opening of all military educational options to women (Krivyakina, 2009).

Female soldiers' professional qualifications are particularly valued. In addition to carrying out some assignments better than men, they bring "composure in the work of the representatives of the stronger sex" and represent "healthy competition for military jobs" (Kartashov/Beresneva, 1994: 6). Women were absent from work significantly fewer times than men, did not go AWOL (absent without leave) and committed fewer breaches of discipline (Ibid.).

The opening of the military to women has been influenced by socio-economic conditions that make their integration into the military community difficult. Nevertheless, women are finding their place. Since the mid-1990s, military representatives have spoken about women as a significant factor for the military efficiency, which demands "serious

consideration in every respect” (Zachartschuk, 2001: 16). In some fields women occupy half of the positions, for example, in radar operations, communications, and air raid defences. Some defence officials have stressed that some parts of the army would become inoperable but for women.

Since 1991, 170 out of 200 military professions have been open to women. Female soldiers carry out up to 40% of engineering and other technical activities, 7% are employed in the medical area, and 1.5% is in the education and training areas (Rykov 2005). While the majority of women work in ground forces, about 1,000 women are in the elite air-borne troops. Women also serve in combat units. Captain Svetlana Protasova is the only woman in Russia who flies a Mig-29 fighter plane. The second woman to be a military pilot is Lieutenant Colonel Galina Koshkina, who pilots a combat helicopter. In the Tula landing troops division, Senior Sergeant Marina Kovaleva is in command of a unit in which women are employed as drivers, gunners and machine gunners. On April 1, 2001, Lubov Kudelina was appointed as the first civilian woman to occupy the post of Deputy Defence Minister, and in this function she is responsible for the finances of the armed forces (Russia: New Deputy Defence Minister, 2009). Her appointment was generally welcomed. The daily *Izvestia* characterized the choice as its “military sensation,” since for the first time it is a woman with high qualification and competence who occupies this post (Ibid.).

Since 1992 women have participated in the humanitarian missions of the UN. In 2001 President Putin conferred high government awards upon 1,700 women for executing their duties and upon a further 200 female soldiers for participation in the combat actions in the Chechen Republic.

Such changes have enabled Russia to achieve a position comparable to that of the USA in terms of the proportion of women in the armed forces. As early as the mid-1990s women constituted 14.4% of total military personnel (Herspring, 1997: 44).⁸ In this way, as part of wider all-embracing social transformation processes, women have gained access to an institution whose doors were mostly closed to them before. This plays an important role in societal power relations.

Issues of Women’s Integration into the Military

The military leadership is endeavouring to use the potential of female soldiers for bringing about transformation within the armed forces. However, there is considerable resistance at all levels and ranks. The armed forces as institutions are still preoccupied with

the adjustment to women's presence in their ranks. The tensions caused by adapting to the new reality are well demonstrated by women's social positions in the armed forces. These affect issues of housing, service contracts, regulations regarding education for women and questions of uniforms and social conditions. Systematic marginalization processes and sexual assaults, the limitations of current legal provisions as well as barriers to accessing military education and careers stand in the way of women. Further, the authorities withhold from women information about career opportunities and their rights in the military. Female soldiers reported about discrimination in contract extensions. The extensions were either rejected by female soldiers' commanders or depended on complaisant behaviour. Further issues for women resulted from failure to comply with working hours and prohibited professional loads. It referred especially to women with low ranks and short working contracts. Female officers, quite to the contrary, struggle for task assignments that correspond to their qualification (Rykov, 2005).

The military leadership criticises as inadequate those officers whose leadership qualities do not further women's integration at the required level. "Optimization of the psychological aspects of the management of female army staff" and "raising of gender culture of the leading officers" are demanded by the military leadership (Martinovich, 2000: 24). However, the majority of officers are still not ready to accept women as equal colleagues. Male officers have an immense bias against women in leadership positions. In their view, men should remain solely responsible for "developing female military representatives" (Smirnov, 2000: 114). Women's deployment in important combat tasks and in combat support measures has been proving to be an enormous challenge. Female soldiers are considered incapable of such work. Among officers there is a prevailing opinion that professional female soldiers in the armed forces are "a deviation from traditional gender roles" (Smirnov, 2000: 114). Therefore, a female soldier who achieves success in her profession is not viewed as a "normal" woman.

When assessing women's professional situations in the armed forces, it is noticeable worldwide that women remain in marginal positions within the military. They have no equal status and cannot be considered integrated. This interpretation can be analysed with the help of "Tokenism" theory, according to which we can speak about integration only when the proportion of a specific group exceeds 15% in an organisation. Representatives who belong to the integrating group are defined as "tokens." Under these conditions, the token group of female soldiers assume different adaptive strategies, which aim at dealing with the conflict between the challenges of the military organisation and personal gender role (Kanter, 1977).

As part of the conflict, the ruling group controls the general context and organisational culture. This results in an intensified performance of gender that discursively accentuates gender differences. In female soldiers' professional situations in the Russian armed forces these relations manifest themselves strongly. This factor is reflected in professional self-awareness, in adaptation and coping mechanisms, i.e. in processing ways of being marginalised. In no other organisation do women confront profession-specific gender discourses to the same extent as in the military. A female soldier is, according to Elshtain (1981), an identity form in extremis. The question of their actions in the organisational context is therefore of particular interest.

In the following section, female soldiers' experiences demonstrate their strategies to adjust themselves to the military environment.

Female Soldiers' Experiences

In light of the discussion above, it is remarkable to note that female soldiers' professional self-awareness is defined by their job satisfaction.⁹ The latter rests on the decision not to allow such difficulties to discourage them in their aspirations to assert themselves in the army. Women show that they are able to cope with the multifaceted circumstances in the armed forces, and through these coping processes female soldiers consider themselves flexible and assertive. Women identify with the military rituals and with the institutional dress code. Above all, young women consider sports and physical fitness, both crucial components of the professional image, to be motivating for military employment. They perceive themselves as able to achieve high physical and psychological standards in the same training as men. Female soldiers, especially those in higher ranks, consider themselves capable of pursuing a military career and they are willing to overcome the barriers that exist in the armed forces.

However, different norms for physical loads and health standards apply for male and female soldiers' daily routines. Women have lower workloads than men and they are given tasks with lesser levels of difficulty. The female soldiers recognize this situation and they criticize it as keeping them away from more responsible and better-paid tasks (Stulov, 2004). There are no officially different requirements for women and men in a given occupation. Nonetheless, there is a special form of discrimination based on seeming assistance and protection towards women. One female soldier explains such protective behaviour as follows:

I have always experience velvet discrimination. In the storm march they try to help me with carrying equipment, but in basic questions in concern of career I am not supported. In general the woman in the army in Russia remains a woman and the man does not leave her any of the combat glory (Ibid.).

Female soldiers whose candidatures were approved for a military career have much difficulty to be recognized and to be accepted as equals by male soldiers.

Military Discourses

The military integration policy is accompanied by a wide variety of discourses. An analysis of various publications of the armed forces and the military-political leadership reveals the difficulties in legitimizing women's admission into the army to be rooted in a deep crisis of military masculinity. Taking into consideration the meaning and extent of women's enrolment in the army, their contribution to armed forces development is relativised and becomes invisible. The exploitation of gender stereotypes plays a significant role in this situation. It is manifested both in military publications and in official statements by the Ministry for National Defence; in both cases they talk not about women and men, rather using "Narrow shoulders" and "weaker sex" as synonyms for women; "strong" and "stronger sex" for men.

Although women are praised for their reliability and exemplary behaviour, they are simultaneously deprecated in all kinds of metaphors. For example, women behave as "exemplary first-graders" in their training, handling the entrusted devices as carefully as if they "swaddled a child" (Izvekova, 1997: 8). Continuous belittlement and diminutive forms are applied: for instance, one female tank driver was characterized as reserved and it was stated that she "will strive for the same feeling of security as a kitten that romped around until it got tired" (Ibid.). In these depictions female soldiers serve as place-holders for men who do not want to fulfil their national responsibility to serve in the army. Simultaneously, reassurance follows that these are not "real soldiers," because they "do not want to become generals, [and] because they don't feel like real soldiers" (Izvekova, 1997: 7). There is reassurance on the part of officials that women's service in the army has nothing to do with emancipation, but rather with "daughters' love to their fatherland" (Zachartschuk, 1995: 16). In contrast, men who refuse to do their military service are characterised as non-Russian, non-masculine and westernized. This juxtaposition emphasises that women only do their job

and that military service is not their national duty, and that it should not be seen as such. Nonetheless, the fact that female soldiers serve in the military gives the authorities licence to declare that “everybody can serve in the army” (Ibid.). Both sides – the military and women – assume the duties of the employment for a certain time. This model, in the view of military officials, suggests a future for the Russian Army as a purely professional force. These new and modern approaches to military service (professional army, contractually guaranteed employment) contrast with the prevailing Soviet attitudes, of ideological and political arguments for military duty. In this new technically and socially well-equipped army men would then resume their places. A new generation of men – such is the hope of some male soldiers - will change the current situation:

Female crews of armoured tracked vehicles will remain a slight recollection in the memory. The gearshift of the combat vehicle will be again in strong men’s hands. (S’is’kin 1996: 11)

These discourses have been accompanied by elaborate constructions of female soldiers’ femininity since the commencement of the integration politics. Thus, each week the editorial office of the military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* selects a “Miss *Krasnaya Zvezda*.” There are combat-ready female soldiers, proud of their military capabilities and of their female charm and beauty to be selected.

Beauty contests and Miss-nominations play a special role in this context. The military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* presents the “beauties” to its readers for the vote. Attractive female soldiers are presented smiling and quite often with a weapon. Such sexist presentations of female soldiers are followed with texts that belittle women and that reduce them to their femininity:

Ensign Irina Petrova, who represents Moscow military district, is one of the beauties. This beauty occupies the post of chief of a depot in one of the military units. Remarkably, Irina considers punctuality as her main merit, which is significant for her occupation. She is friendly, loves singing and dances well, she becomes a “company soul” at once. She is a joyful and lively girly with a sharp tongue. Wind, storm, lightning and sun come curiously into harmony in her person. Being so vigorous, Irina manages to read good historic

books, play with her cat Masyanya, also a blonde like her owner, and her poodle Lona, and to cook something tasty for her friends. (Pavlyutkina, 2005a)

Since the beginning of the 1990s beauty contests have been taking place every year, and up to 90,000-100,000 women in ranks from lance-corporal to captain have taken part in them and have competed for the title of “Miss Epaulettes.” The finalists were highly qualified with jobs as wide-ranging as psychologists, engineers, military journalists, and spotters. In the last part of the contest they donned their uniforms and demonstrated their general military skills as well as their knowledge of Russian military history. The winner was selected on International Women’s Day, a national holiday in Russia. The beauty contests are strongly supported by the military leadership. Within this context the women encounter apparent appreciation. According to the former Defence Minister Sergev Ivanov, the beauty contest aims at making military service more appealing, and the hope is that the female soldiers’ beauty and cleverness should serve to raise the social prestige of the armed forces (Pavlyutkina, 2005b). In 2005 the finalist selection took place within the Victory parade, dedicated to the 60th anniversary of victory over fascism, on Red Square in Moscow. Ivanov’s greetings manifest a typical linkage of discourses about female soldiers’ significance for the armed forces to their femininity:

You, representatives of the current generation of fatherland female defenders, persuasively confirmed the indisputable truth once again: Russian women, who have chosen the military service as their fate, are no less charming and attractive than famous winners of global beauty contests. In long and hard struggle you managed to demonstrate your deep professional knowledge, to show your capability of successfully carrying out the most difficult official tasks, to prove that you are worthy successors of the military glory of your predecessors by right. (Ibid.)

Such beauty contests are widely supported by women. A survey was conducted in 2005 by the Sociological Center of the Russian armed forces and titled “Beauties with epaulettes: female soldiers’ place in the Russian army” (Krasavitsy v pogonah, 2005). Only female soldiers were interviewed. 53% of the women surveyed evaluated beauty contests as positive. By far the most important part of the contest was performance in parade uniforms (84%), but the women also suggested that women’s education and military skills should be

included. 52% of respondents favoured extending competition categories to include cooking, dancing, singing, and car driving (Krasavitsy v pogonah, 2005; Pavlyutkina, 2005c).

The question arises as to how a professional female soldier's self-awareness, on the one hand, and femininity constructions, on the other hand, become melded. For female soldiers the performance of femininity is highly valued in the everyday context of the military. Femininity serves as protection and gives female soldiers a type of immunity in a difficult field. In this sense femininity stands as a safeguard and a border for individuality. Being feminine in the service is regarded by female soldiers as an important strategy for achieving their aims in their chosen field. Thus, one female officer explains, "One can always solve certain problems, even those related to work, with personal charm" (Eifler 2003a). Women see such individual representation as one way of asserting themselves in the male dominated environment. Looking good, being attractive and neatly dressed, and wearing subtle make-up is viewed as a cultural difference to masculinity constructions, being distinct from "scruffy male officers." They feel that a woman's appearance is an expression of a woman's essence and it should be visible and should encourage an appropriate attitude:

A woman, first of all, stands as a symbol of grace, charm, and gentleness. If she is bitchy, a shrew, who will want then talk to her? If she has good eyes, a good soul, who will treat her badly then? (Eifler 2003a)

Thus, female beauty and charm becomes a form of gendered political capital. "It does not matter how tough it is in the army, a woman remains a woman" (Eifler, 2003).¹⁰ Female soldiers use this rationale to separate themselves from the uncivilized male soldiers. Women regard themselves as better soldiers than their male counterparts. They feel superior. However, they do not exercise any institutional or political critique.

In this context, when we examine the intersections of military and individual discourses of female soldiers in Russia, we discover differing interests. From the military standpoint, femininity constructions help to convey different gender-specific messages within the army: on the institutional power level the presence of women is presented not only as a threat for gender relations in general, but also as the beginning of a new competition – gender competition. On the individual level of gender relations, the message to women is that the army also represents a marriage market, an attractive and "contemporary" place for the presentation of femininity. Men receive the message that women respect the military and value servicemen. And the message conveyed to both men and women is that women do not

lose their attractiveness in the army; they remain self-confident and responsible, but also tender and partnership-oriented. These femininity constructions signal that, despite their orientation within a masculine domain, “military” women remain women and that traditional gender relations are not jeopardised.

Conclusion

If we question the efficiency of such femininity constructions towards the professional activities of female soldiers, we have to take into account the particular way that gender differences are reproduced in the military. Since its inception, the contemporary military has produced gender constructions wherein the competence of military service is linked to the male gender. As a result, the profession of soldiering has developed a standard of strong sustainable male bonding. Corresponding empirical research, particularly in the USA, shows that this male bonding seems to be more relevant for identification purposes in the military professions than for any other “male professions” and it leads to exclusion (Barrett, 1999).

The analysis confirms a key position in gender studies, namely, that power relations and access to social capital are regulated via gender constructions. In this process two lines of discourse intersect: on the one hand, the military as an institution demands from female soldiers a professional self-awareness predicated on constructions of femininity within the corresponding masculinity of the army. On the other hand, the military leadership is faced with the difficulty of integrating women while preserving the essential masculinity of the military.

As research shows, the cultural patterns for female soldier identity construction are not new. Beginning from the Soviet era, the military proved itself capable of dismissing women’s claims for change and recognition of their work. Such dismissal continues today and we are left to wonder to see how much longer this state of affairs will persist.

Notes

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² Prof. Dr. Christine Eifler is Head of the Centre of Gender Studies, University of Bremen. She has conducted research about the Armed Forces and the Social Construction of Gender in the Military in the USA, Russia, Germany and Post-socialist Eastern Europe. Dr. Eifler is

head of a doctoral programme at the Centre of Gender Studies at the University of Bremen titled "Gender Dynamics in Violent Conflicts." The main research topics include gender and the military, the social construction of gender in East Germany, and cultural differences of women in East and West Europe.

³ 2006: Poland 0.52%, Romania 5%, Bulgaria 6%, Slovakia 7.7%, Czech Republic 12.21%, Lithuania 12.5%, Russia 13.5%, Hungary 17.56 % (Percentages, 2009). As a public employer, the military has also to consider relevant national, social and labour laws and agreements. In the armed forces, women have achieved a certain level of access to different military service branches, types of mission and types of unit.

⁴ For example, the "Society for defence support" and the sports association "Ready for work and defence of the USSR," created in 1937 (Seidler, 1998: 348).

⁵ Many of the women interviewed by Alexijewitsch belong to former front combat units who did not get any support to study after the war was over. Others could not afford their own apartment in spite of employment and had to live in communal flats, which stood for low social status in the Soviet Union.

⁶ Out of 1,415 research projects on the development of the Soviet armed forces between 1918 and 1992, there are only four articles that dealt with women's role in the military (Erickson and Erickson, 1996).

⁷ This reproach is not specific to the Soviet Union. It is however remarkable that women still have to debate this issue and that it became a central feature of their ambivalent self-image, which still requires justification for combat missions for themselves and for other women (Eifler, 2001).

⁸ In 2005 the number of women in the armed forces of the USA was 15.5%; however, in 2006 their number dropped to 10.49%. (Percentages 2009). The war in Afghanistan and Iraq resulted in strong debates about military careers and about a female soldier's role within the armed forces and led to restrictions in women's deployment. As follows the results of a qualitative survey are presented. Female soldiers' individual discourses are in the focus here. Women's professional experiences in the army were of interest in my interviews. Thirty female soldiers were interviewed in 2001. The results of interviews may be found in Eifler 2003a and Eifler 2003b.

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¹⁰ As other research shows, this expression is not limited to the military area, it is a stereotype generally shared and employed by women in Russia (Godel, 2002: 171).

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