Brutal, Bloody, and Born to Fight: Russian Women's Contributions to Combat and Revolution in World War I

Maddie Kindig

If the maxim "all war is hell" is true, then this common sentiment must especially be true for the war of attrition that was World War I. In historical and academic circles, The First World War is referred to as "The Great War." This Great War, spanning from 1914 to 1918 was one that, as this designation implies, was so great that it changed the world in a way no one was truly capable of foreseeing. A war of this scale had never been seen before in history. Through technological and munitions advancements, complicated and entangled alliance systems, new fighting tactics in the form of trench warfare, the downfall of multiple empires, or casualty numbers of soldiers and civilians alike in the millions, this war affected the lives of everyone involved, especially those on the periphery. Throughout these ferocious and cruel four years, not only were civilians' lives affected by the lack of rations and stress of inflation, but societal norms and mores were also beginning to change and reflect these nefarious times. As wartime progressed and had no inclination of declining or halting, desperate times soon called for desperate measures. One noticeable way in which desire for national

pride and protection manifested was in the largest country involved in this Great War: Russia.

Russia, with its burgeoning technological and militaristic advancements, knew that now was the time to "flex its muscles" in order to show the opposition, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the level of destruction it was capable of inflicting in order to prove its place as a great world power. This autocratic country had been steeped in hierarchy and what later opposing minds would refer to as "oppression." Imperial Russian law, up until this point, forbade women from joining the war for combat. High casualty numbers had indicated that more Russian soldiers were needed in order to sustain their combat efforts on multiple borders. It is important to explore this pivot point in Russian history due to the shifting role of women; women for the first time were allowed in the front lines of the military and were able to take positions of power back at home in both the form of job opportunities as well as political and revolutionary capabilities. The changing roles for women in Russia can be seen most glaringly through an all-women military unit of nearly 3,000 women, bluntly called "The Women's Battalion of Death."[1] On the heels of these women were

[1] Robin Cross, *Warrior Women: 3000 Years of Courage and Heroism* (New York: Metro Books, 2011), 228.

women writers and political activists who were involved in the subsequent Russian Revolution of 1917 that forced Russia to exit the war sooner than had been originally thought. It is in accordance with that movement, that the speculation is as follows: The changing roles for women in Russia, through joining combat forces, helped fuel the importance, prominence, and involvement of women leaders in the following Russian "Bolshevik" Revolution. Successful participation in war, it can be argued, was the perfect catalyst for women to not only open the door, but to shatter the door's hinges, to what used to be all-male dominated fields, particularly political and revolutionary fields. This thesis supports and confirms the idea that Kathryn J. Atwood provides in her book, *Women Heroes of World War I: 16 Remarkable Resisters, Soldiers, Spies, and Medics (Women of Action)*, mainly as insight to the changing and reforming ideas of Russian women as fierce, motivated, and deadly.[2]

Before the Women's Battalion of Death had been formed, life in Russia was changing for women in the form of job opportunities. With hordes of men called to war or volunteering to fight, their newly vacated factory positions were open and in high demand to be filled, particularly

[2] Kathryn J. Atwood, *Women Heroes of World War I: 16 Remarkable Resisters, Soldiers, Spies, and Medics (Women of Action)* (Chicago, IL.: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 143.

for munitions. In fact, now after one and a half years in war, the number of Russian women workers in technological industry increased by 74%.[3] In 1916, a *New York Times* article shows how these new positions in factories and workshops were changing the status of women. "Through evil necessity, women, both in the West and Russia, have been compelled to take up activities demanding special physical endurance, accompanied by high degree risk. Thus, the immense new metallurgical undertakings in the Urals are possible because women fill all the positions of unskilled labor."[4] What makes this article more pertinent to the grand scheme of changing attitudes was that this shift toward allowing women to become inspectors of factories and workshops had been voted on by the Duma of Russia. This is particularly paramount because it showed that the government took note of just how imperative it was to allow women to help their Motherland thrive in the face of destruction. Women's unpaid labor and yearning to work outside the home, away from the hearth, was being noticed by the Russian government. It was through the desperation of war that these women were provided an opportunity to share their loyalty to their country. Because women were, for the first time, allowed to hold positions of

[3] Charles Johnston, "War Changing Status of Women in Russia: The Duma is Now Considering a Bill to Appoint Them Inspectors of All Factories and Workshops," *New York Times,* August 3, 1916.
[4] Johnston. "War Changing Status of Women in Russia." *New York Times.*

power within factories, their status accelerated and propelled their changing image in the eyes of the public.

Later as the war progressed, namely 1916 to 1917, these aforementioned changes in women's roles had been steadily making ground not only within the Duma, but also with in big cities and small towns alike. Without a doubt, women's achievements and advancements in industry and society turned them from a seemingly kindling of promise to an imposing and irrefutable raging bonfire. Not long after women were granted the responsibilities of becoming inspectors of factories, a new air of transformation surged onward. Now, women were banding together in the biggest Russian cities, Moscow and Petrograd, to form small military units. On the third of August, a report from Petrograd came in to the *New York Times* to highlight the new battalion of women being raised by a university student and Chairwomen of the Women's Military League at Engineers' Palace. More than anything, the physical characteristics of these women soldiers seem to be the focus of the commentary. The article states, "Sixty percent of the members are peasant working girls of sturdy physique, with hard features and tanned faces." Even more importantly, the chief instructor of recruits says, "I have drilled hundreds of men soldiers, but I do not hesitate to declare that these women learn with double speed…Their overmastering motive

is the patriotic desire to save Russia from ruin. Many of them display a zeal and ardor worthy of Joan of Arc."[5] What is so telling about this article is the way these women are described. Not only are they acknowledged to be peasants, but also these women are often, not so deftly, described as looking harsh and masculine in stature and overall disposition. That logic supports the idea that peasants were more likely to become the most vitriolic fighters for the Russian army. Acting as a thesis within the aforementioned scope of this paper, it can be said that these women soldiers were not merely peasants fighting because they were blindly agreeing to the aspect of nationalism and live for the Motherland. Rather, research has shown that these women soldiers had varying reasons for joining these all women military units. In particular, we can see different examples for joining the Women's Battalion of Death by two women military leaders in general: Maria Bochkareva and Marya Skridlova.

The woman accredited with the formal organization in 1917 of the Women's Battalion of Death was brought up as a peasant in the Russian countryside. Her name was Maria Bochkareva, but she often referred to herself as Yashka. Interestingly enough, Bochkareva had

[5] "Great Army of Women Forming in Russia: Petrograd, Moscow, and Kiev Recruiting Centers—New Battalion in the Capital," *New York Times.* August 3, 1917.

earlier been denied the opportunity to join the military but was later granted access by Czar Nicholas II in 1914. Up until this point, Maria was the first and only woman permitted to engage in combat in WWI. In her autobiography, she makes note to how nervous she was as she lobbied the Czar. Fear of rejection and backlash was something Maria, as a woman and a solider, was already familiar with by this point. Throughout the time she spent fighting on the frontlines, she had been injured multiple times, briefly captured by the Germans, forced to carry the dead bodies of her fellow soldiers, and overall had been brutalized and desensitized by the war. In her previously mentioned autobiography, written in 1919, she describes the ways in which she noticed that one of Russia's major obstacles was the sheer lack of soldiers available to fight. After being in contact with the President of the Duma, Mikhail Rodzianko, for a solution, she wrote:

> The session continued, while I sank deep into thought. For half an hour I racked my brain in vain. Then suddenly an idea dawned upon me. It was the idea of a Women's Battalion of Death. 'You have heard of what I have done and endured as a soldier,' I said, rising to my feet and turning to the audience. 'Now, how would it do to organize three hundred women like myself to serve as an example to the army and lead the men into battle?' Rodzianko approved of my idea. 'Provided,' he added, 'we could find hundreds more like Maria Botchkareva, which I greatly doubt.' To this objection I replied that numbers were immaterial, that what was important was to shame the men, and that a few women at one place could serve as an example to the entire front. 'It would be necessary that the women's

> organization should have no committees and be run on the regular army basis in order to enable it to help towards the restoration of discipline,' I further explained.[6]

This change in responsibility and power dynamic is so meaningful in looking at the ways that women's changing roles allowed them to experience having positions of power that never would have been considered in the past. This shift is highlighted by the fact that, Bochkareva was not only asked for her advice on the matter, but she was afforded the opportunity to further change the way women were perceived by forming an entire battalion for one goal and one goal only: death to the enemy.

Maria Bochkareva was truly a revolutionary during this time, as a poor peasant turned soldier and later into the leader of a battalion; she was the first to cause a stir that was not seen as by those in the Duma and society as "too progressive." Most notably, the people of Russia knew that a Women's Battalion of Death was not forming to "overthrow hierarchy" or "cause trouble", but this battalion was to help save Russia from ultimate destruction by the Central Powers: an idea that the entirety of the nation could support. In order to realize the gravity of this particular battalion in the Russian Army, one must start by first taking a

[6] Maria Bochkareva, *Yashka, My Life as a Peasant, Officer and Exile* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1919), 157.

magnifying lens to the name these women chose for themselves. This battalion was named "The Women's Battalion of Death" for three distinct reasons: Precisely because it was formed entirely of women, to show that women could, indeed, fight and die bravely for Mother Russia, and, arguably the most essential element of this battalion, to humiliate the German army even further. A battalion comprised of only women was a tool to embarrass Germany mainly because of the strict, patriarchal values to which German public adhered; women's involvement in the German combat military was forbidden.

Bochkareva, however, was not recognizable in Russia alone. On a visit to Petrograd, British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst provided insight into the disposition and appearance of Bochkareva during one of many parades thrown in honor of the Women's Battalion of Death. This particular opinion of Pankhurst is highlighted in Adam Hochschild's book, *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918.* Pankhurst wrote, "The Tsar had given her special permission to enlist in the army, where Bochkareva had fought in a combat unit, bayoneted a German soldier to death, and been wounded several times. She smoked, drank, and swore, punched anyone who harassed her, and in a language where many words change with the speaker's gender, used the male forms. One observer described her as "a big peasant woman, strong as a

horse, a rough of manner, eating with her fingers by choice, unlettered, but of much native intelligence."[7]

As previously mentioned the former peasant status of Bochkareva should not be too heavily looked upon nor disregarded. Her motivations for fighting in this war were not for lack of education or blind nationalism. Her incentive for war can be identified in a speech she gave in yet another one of the many parades thrown in the honor of the Women's Battalion of Death. Bochkareva stated, "Come with us in the name of your fallen heroes. Come with us to dry the tears and heal the wounds of Russia. Protect her with your lives. We women are turning into tigresses to protect our children from a shameful yoke – to protect the freedom of our country!"[8] Bochkareva's motives were made clear by this proclamation, but there were other women who were influential and their reasons for enlisting were. For example, Marya Skridlova, Bochkareva's right-hand-woman, came from a much different upbringing but with relatively similar aspirations for Russia and her subsequent joining of the battalion. Skridlova was the daughter of the famous WWI Russian Admiral by the masculine version of the name, Skridloff. Once again, coming from Hochschild's book, Skridlova

[7] Adam, Hochschild, *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 282.
[8] Bochkareva, 65.

identified her motivations as follows, "The soul of the army is sick and we must heal it."[9] These two women had common threads running through their political agendas. While their individuality shined through to others around them, their unifying ideals made them bind together for the same cause.

With linking back to the idea that peasants were more likely to become the most vitriolic fighters for the Russian army, the conclusion that only peasant women with lack of education and meager worldly ideas and critical thinking were the only ones to join the battalion is false. On the contrary, women of high status and those who were afforded the opportunity to become educated also thought the prospect of war and truly being empowered to protect the Motherland were noble pursuits.[10] Even more backing of this claim comes by a quote from Bessie Beatty, an American journalist who wrote a book to chronicle her time reporting on the upcoming Russian Revolution in Petrograd. Beatty, who also attended the ever-frequent battalion parades, offers this depiction of appearances and motivations of the various types of women soldiers. "At their head was Bachkarova, the peasant. Beside her marched Marya Skridlova, the aristocrat, aide-de-camp, tall and

[9] Bessie Beatty, *The Red Heart of Russia* (New York City: Century Company Publishers, 1918), 107.
[10] "Women Soldiers on Parade."

patrician, daughter of a famous Russian admiral and Minister of Marine… Some, like Bachkarova, in the days of the Siberian village had simply come to the point where anything was better than the dreary drudgery and the drearier waiting of life as they lived it. Personal sorrow had driven some of them out of their homes and on to the battle-line. One girl, a Japanese, said tragically, when I asked her reason for joining: 'My reasons are so many that I would rather not tell them.' Women can fight. Women have the courage, the endurance, even the strength, for fighting."[11] Women of high status, women of low peasant status, and women able to transcend other cultural and societal categories, were eager and able to now fight to protect their homeland. This change in status was able to shatter the illusion that women could simply not participate within the public sphere. Now that women could be seen as fierce, motivated, and brutal fighters, they were also beginning to have equal footing with their male counterparts, both on and off the battlefront. With women now being seen in a completely different light than ever before and a revolution soon to unstitch the fabric of the already fragile government, it begs the question: What is next for the women of Russia?

[11] Beatty, *The Red Heart of Russia*, 114.

In connection with the war and the Bolshevik Revolution soon to follow, it is time to turn the focus to a prominent and (in)famous woman writer and political activist for the Bolshevik Revolution, Alexandra Kollontai. Before this time, women holding political positions were still relatively unheard of. Kollontai was a writer whose motivations and successes came in the form of her support of the Bolshevik Party of Russia. As a Socialist and a Marxist, one of her most important visions for the destiny of Russia was to encourage the workingwomen of Russia to fight for their own interest in order to build a future of happiness, success, and camaraderie. The following excerpt from an article written by Kollontai in December of 1917 shows her vitriol for the Bolshevik revolution. Since it is later in the war, she also sheds light on why it is important to spend more time worrying about the change it would bring to the country if the Bolshevik party won. Kollontai wrote, "As far back as April the Bolsheviks put forward the slogan: 'All power to the Soviets!' and repeatedly emphasized that it was essential to end the war. However, the war could only be ended by revolution and the overthrow of the bourgeois-capitalist government. Therefore, anyone who wanted to fight for peace had, at the same time, to fight to seize power. The more resolutely the Bolsheviks supported these slogans, the more savagely they were attacked by their political opponents, by the Cadets and their

lackeys from the socialist party – the social-patriots. But the Bolsheviks calmly continued their work, fulfilling their great historical mission."[12] Like many other Bolshevik supporters, Kollontai believed it was in the best interest of the country to cease fighting a war that pitted worker against worker. In contrast to the support and in honor of the Women's Battalion of Death, Alexandra Kollontai was able to gain credentials for herself by stating definitively that the war needed to be stopped. It is both surprising and revolutionary for a woman to hold this opinion, and to so publicly state it, because the earlier attitudes for Russia were very pro-war. In following with those sentiments, it can be argued that the tenacious and impassioned women soldiers in the Women's Battalion of Death afforded women like Kollontai to be able to share their contributions to society with great impunity.

The advancement of women in both the military and the political sphere not only helped society to recognize women as nearly equal to their male counterparts, but it allowed an air of revolution to sweep across the nation in a way many Russian people never dreamed possible. By empowering women to speak out in public political spaces, a greater conversation could now be brought to the forefront regarding how they

[12] Alexandra Kollontai, "Why the Bolsheviks Must Win," *Revolt.* December 1917.

had been treated in the past and what sort treatment would be acceptable and/or unacceptable for the future. Was it now okay to kill a woman if she is a solider? Could women in the home contribute even better ideas about what a successful revolution should look like? Both of these questions bear the answer of a resounding, "Yes!" The breakdown in traditional gender ideals first seen in the combatant women soldiers helped to pave the way for a burgeoning societal shift. With growing momentum, Communism was seen as a way to further the emancipation of Russian women. This idea is one that Alexandra Kollontai held dear. To provide an example, author Barbara Clemens uses Kollontai's ideology to show just how important Communism could and would become, especially if the people of Russia kept listening to women leaders like Kollontai. Clemens argued that, "World War I had provided the final impetus to the development of female consciousness, in addition making the economic contribution of women irreplaceable. Exploited more than men, women workers revealed the drain on their strength in lowered birth rates, higher mother and infant mortality rates, and more abortions and stillbirths. Their economic value had forced some countries to enact protective legislation. Though inadequate, these laws were a step in the right direction."[13]

[13] Barbara Evans Clemens, "Emancipation Through Communism: The Ideology of A.M.

Of all the changes in available roles for women at this time, it is imperative to note that it was perhaps the fervor of women working in powerful factory positions that inspired Russian women to see that they were destined for more than menial work. That is why the Women's Battalion of Death became so popular and well attended by women across the country. Even though the Bolshevik women leaders opposed war, it directed them to the irreplaceable fact that women were capable of so much more than they had been given the credit or opportunity for. In tying these two themes together more coherently, a quote by author Melissa Stockdale about the ideology of Alexandra Kollontai provides the perfect example of how changing roles for women affected both wartime and political dogma. Stockdale states, "Russia, like every other combatant, was mobilizing all its human resources, and Russian women were mobilizing themselves. The story of Russia's women soldiers is also one of patriotism, how it is configured and how it manifests itself, especially in moments of national emergency: acceptance so radical a phenomenon as female soldiers had much to do with fears that the country was on the verge of calamitous defeat." Stockdale, referring back to women's involvement in the 1917 Revolution, wrote, "The February 1917 revolution proclaimed the disparate subjects of the empire

Kollontai." *The Slavic Review* 32.2: (1973): 323-326, 338.

to be free and equal citizens, with the duties as well as rights that citizenship entails. Thousands of women interpreted this equality to mean that women could and should assume the citizen's right to bear arms."[14] The Great War, unlike any war beforehand, had propelled the status of women from simple peasants, to brutal fighters, to political revolutionaries. The nature of war and revolution allowed these women to be part of something greater than themselves; the war allowed them to be brutal, bloody, and born to fight for their country.

[14] Melissa K Stockdale, "'My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness': Women, Patriotism, and Soldiering in Russia's Great War, 1914-1917," *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 78-80, 116.

Bibliography

Beatty, Bessie. *The Red Heart of Russia.* New York City: Century Company Publishers, 1918.

Benthuysen, Elizabeth. "The Tragedy of Russia's Women." *New York Times.* November 17, 1918.

Bochkareva, Mariia. *Yashka, My Life as a Peasant, Officer and Exile.* New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1919.

Clements, Barbara Evans. "Emancipation Through Communism: The Ideology of A.M. Kollontai." *The Slavic Review* 32.2 (1973): 323-338.

Cross, Robin. *Warrior Women: 3000 Years of Courage and Heroism.* New York: Metro Books, 2011.

"Great Army of Women Forming in Russia: Petrograd, Moscow, and Kiev Recruiting Centers—New Battalion in the Capital." *New York Times.* August 3, 1917.

Hochschild, Adam. *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

Johnston, Charles. "War Changing Status of Women in Russia: The Duma is Now Considering a Bill to Appoint Them Inspectors of All Factories and Workshops." *New York Times.* August 3, 1916.

Kollontai, Alexandra. "Why the Bolsheviks Must Win." *Revolt.* December 1917.

Stockdale, Melissa K. "'My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness': Women, Patriotism, and Soldiering in Russia's Great War, 1914-1917." *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 78-116.

"Women Soldiers on Parade." *New York Times*. September 30, 1917.