

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**Women Combatants in World War I:  
A Russian Case Study**

by

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## ABSTRACT

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World War I was a watershed event for women. The record of women's singular and nationally unsanctioned participation in warfare goes back for centuries, but it is not until WWI that governments, across the globe, were willing to officially allow women to join the armed forces, wear the uniform, and participate openly as women. This paper initially demonstrates that WWI was the first modern era war, where women, in large populations, participated in the conduct of warfare. It compares the degree of utilization and the roles of women by four of the major powers in WWI: Britain, the United States, Germany, and Russia. While Britain, the U.S., and Germany allowed women to support the war in various degrees of uniformed integration, none of them armed their women nor located them dangerously close to combat. In general, women were used to supplement the manpower shortage and free able-bodied men to serve as combatants. Russia, however, stands apart from all other nations in its extraordinary use of women in combat. Focusing on Russia's great divergence from the popularly accepted norm that women should not be armed in war, the majority of the paper demonstrates the extent of Russia's use of women in combat roles superimposed on the political backdrop of WWI and the Russian Revolution. A strong emphasis is given to Maria Bochkareva and the infantry unit that she created during the Provisional Government period in 1917. Her unit, "The Women's Battalion of Death," was the first of such women's combat units, and the only one to be tested on the front lines. In addition to providing a case study on the historical use of women in combat, Bochkareva's unit may also provide insights to the ongoing discussion within the U.S. military today of allowing women to serve in all branches, including infantry and other restricted fields. What makes this historical account so enigmatic is that even today, after 85 years of continued breakthroughs of women into "traditionally male roles," most nations still view women combatants as the exception rather than the rule.



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## WOMEN COMBATANTS IN WORLD WAR I: A RUSSIAN CASE STUDY

In today's military establishment, one of the universal concerns about incorporating women into combatant roles has been the assertion that mixed genders could damage the warrior spirit and ultimately the combat effectiveness of the unit. Another commonly held belief is that women are not physically or psychologically equipped to handle the hardships and brutality of warfare. In terms of maintaining military effectiveness, many in the military agree that there is no justification in increasing roles of women in combat for the sake of gender "equality" and a quest for "gender balance" throughout all the combat branches of the Armed Forces at the cost of debilitating overall combat performance<sup>1</sup>. Examining previous populations of women in combat, such as the utilization of Russian women combatants in World War I (WWI), addresses these concerns as the American military establishment continues its efforts to integrate women into the force.

WWI was a global watershed event for women. While women historically had served as nurses on the battlefield, or even dressed as men and fought, it was not until WWI, with its unprecedented demands for manpower, that women changed their roles in society and entered the military establishment in sizable numbers. Traditionally, warfare and the practice of using brute force to kill the enemy had been viewed as principally a male responsibility. Russia was the most progressive nation in utilizing women for military purposes and created a new paradigm by giving women some of this responsibility.

During the war, Russia experimented with the extraordinary participation of thousands of women in direct combat roles. Prior to the Revolution (1914-1917), relatively small numbers of women disguised as men served side-by-side with men in combat units. One of only a handful of woman, however, Maria Bochkareva, held the distinction of serving, with the government's approval, as a female in a combat unit. After the abdication of the Tsar in 1917, Bochkareva organized and commanded the "Women's Battalion of Death" under the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky. The success of the "Women's Battalion of Death" prompted Kerensky to organize other women's combat units. Estimates assembled from various unofficial published sources suggest that significant numbers, approximately 5,000 to 6,000 Russian women, participated as combatants in WWI under the Provisional Government.<sup>2</sup> Members of one of these women's units achieved notoriety for helping defend the Provisional Government at the Winter Palace in Petrograd during the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in November 1917. The Bolsheviks, in turn, disbanded the Provisional Government's women's combat units and organized its own. While this paper does not explore the participation of

women combatants during the Russian Civil War period from 1918-1920, it is interesting to note that the phenomenal number of over 80,000 women served as soldiers in the Red Army against the White anti-communist forces.<sup>3</sup>

Russia's extraordinary use of women warriors is relatively unknown in the American military establishment and among many students of history. Their participation as warriors seems to have been victim of what historian D'Ann Campbell describes as the "invisible combatants." Russia is not unique in providing little official documentation of women's participation during their wars. John Keegan, a renowned military historian declared in A History of Warfare:

Warfare is ...the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart...Women...do not fight...and they never, in any military sense, fight men.<sup>4</sup>

Keegan illustrates a phenomenon of "patriarchal erasure" of the facts among certain leaders and historians that omit women's contributions to the historical record after the fact<sup>5</sup>. These omissions have certainly been the case concerning Russian women combatants in WWI. Alexander Kerensky, for example, who was instrumental in establishing women's units, either intentionally or accidentally contributed to the erasure of women's historical military significance. He failed even to mention women in the military in his memoirs. Such a significant omission tends to support the "patriarchal erasure" phenomenon. Kerensky biographer, Richard Abraham, observed in Alexander Kerensky: The First Love of the Revolution that "neither Kerensky nor Provisional Duma President, Mikhail Rodzianko, an ardent supporter of Maria Bochkareva and the Women's Battalion of Death, found it worth mentioning the women in their memoirs."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Western scholarship contains scant references that document women's utilization by the Russian (or Soviet) government during WWI. Despite the lack of scholarship and documentation, however, a case study of Russian women's participation in combat has been possible largely based on published primary source materials (press releases) and memoirs.

Beginning with WWI, nations such as the United States, Great Britain, and Germany, allowed women, to varying degrees, to join the support ranks of their military. But only Russia provided women the unprecedented opportunity to serve as combatants *en masse*. Contrasted with that reality, still 90 years later, after tremendous assimilation of women into leadership roles throughout American society, in both the civil and military sectors, the U.S. is nowhere close to matching the utilization of women in combat roles that Russian women experienced during WWI. Some may ask why the United States military, perhaps the most lethal fighting force on

the globe, would benefit from investigating the dramatic use of Russian women combatants in a war that occurred nearly 100 years ago. While the technology and tactics of warfare has greatly progressed since WWI, the human dimension of Russia's use of women combatants in that war indicates that there may be some important lessons if the experience is examined.

The professional dialogue of allowing women into all the combat arms branches in the U.S. military is an issue still open for debate. The November/December 2002 issue of the *Military Review* periodical hosted an entire section of articles addressing the feasibility of opening up the current restrictions regarding U.S. women soldiers; it supports granting qualified women the opportunity to participate in all combat branches.<sup>7</sup> Bringing historical evidence to bear on how well women combatants actually performed in the past and identifying their integration issues is relevant in shaping how the U.S. will man its Armed Forces in the near future. The combat experience of Lieutenant Maria Bochkareva's unit, the "Women's Battalion of Death," suggest that women can, and have fought bravely and effectively on the battlefield. One of the important lessons gained from studying their experience is that as the technology of weaponry increases, the need to physically engage the enemy decreases and soldiers' physical strength becomes less relevant. This inverse relationship of technology to physical strength helps support the case for allowing women to participate as combatants. While direct correlations are difficult to make between 21<sup>st</sup> Century American women and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian women soldiers, there are enough similarities to make the investigation valuable. In the present, just as during WWI, many of the same questions should be addressed in the dialogue. At a minimum, these questions include: If women can fight, should they fight? And, how does our cultural orientation affect the ability of men and women to successfully integrate as a combat unit?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer conclusions on the ongoing dialogue about the feasibility and acceptability of women participating as direct combatants in the U.S. military. Rather, this paper offers a researched study of Russia's experience in using women in combat for future reference. The experience of these early women combatants is an unusual and important historical account, scarcely acknowledged by historians. This paper will add to the current historical record by reviewing the literature, consolidating accounts, introducing new documents recently translated from Russian, and deconflicting some misconceptions regarding these Russian women combatant units. A strong emphasis is given to Maria Bochkareva<sup>8</sup> and the infantry unit that she created during Kerensky's rule, since it was the first of such units, and the only one to be tested on the front lines in combat. Clarifying the historical record through a



case study of women combatants has some relevance in the consideration of women as combatants for contemporary Armed Forces.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN WORLD WAR I**

The record of women's participation in warfare goes back to the dawn of prerecorded history, which invokes ancient memories of women warriors, most famously embodied in the Amazon civilization. This matriarchal empire was founded, governed and defended by women; it has left an indelible memory on modern societies when considering a role for women in warfare. Later examples of historic women participating in warfare demonstrate that they served bravely in both support roles and even as combatants, when circumstances allowed. Examples of women in combat include the Old Testament's acclaim of Deborah, who commanded the Israelites during the Judges period; Joan of Arc's fame in leading the French Army in the 1400's;<sup>9</sup> the American Revolutionary War heroine "Molly" Pitcher taking over her husbands' gun position after the soldiers manning it were seriously injured or killed; and even the American Civil War physician, Dr. Mary Walker, who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for her courageous and important work as a contract surgeon.<sup>10</sup> While these women's contributions demonstrate martial capability and warrior spirit, they were singular and exceptional events, principally fueled by personal determination and rare circumstances.

By the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, some nations allowed women to serve as nurses for their various militaries. But they did not begin to officially sanction the use of women as uniformed service members until World War I. Globally, the First World War generated an unprecedented demand for manpower, and subsequently created new opportunities for women to serve in the military. The use of women to support the war effort varied greatly from one nation to another. The experiences of America, Great Britain, Germany, and Russia offer a range of examples of how women were allowed to serve in the military during the war. While these nations had similar policies for utilizing women in non-combatant duties to free men for combatant assignments, there were significant differences in how each nation used women. As will be presented in more detail, Germany, for example, had the most conservative policies; Germany eventually relied on women to work outside the home as a means of freeing more men for the military, rather than enlisting women service members. Russia, with the most liberal policies, went to the extreme of organizing all-women combat units, one of which, the "Women's Battalion of Death," actually participated in fighting on the Eastern Front. America and Great Britain fell somewhere in between, relying on women in uniform to serve, but in rear areas away from combat. Taken together, the experiences of these nations signaled the dawn

of a new era for women's participation in the military. The door for "women in uniform" had been forever thrown open.

#### MILITARY WOMEN OF THE UNITED STATES

For the United States, the Navy served as the initial catalyst for officially introducing women into the uniformed service as full-status members of the military. Although the establishment in 1901 of the Army Nurse Corps (female) marked a significant step in incorporating women into the military, Army nurses were appointed, not commissioned, and were not accorded military status or rights.<sup>11</sup> In 1916, Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels anticipated America's eventual involvement in WWI and the subsequent shortage in manpower for the fleet. After confirming with his legal advisor that "yeomen" duties were not restricted to men only, he directed: "Then enroll women in the Naval Reserve as yeomen, and we will have the best clerical assistance the country can provide."<sup>12</sup> By taking advantage of this loophole in the regulation, the Navy, on 19



FIGURE 1: THREE MARINES

March 1917, was the first Service to enlist women. By the end of the war, 11,882 Yeoman (F)'s (commonly called "yeomanettes") served in various noncombatant roles, such as clerks, chemists, radio electricians, draftsmen, switchboard operators, translators, pharmacists, accountants, fingerprint experts, recruiters, and Naval Intelligence specialists.<sup>13</sup> Filling these positions with women was certainly vital in freeing men to serve as combatants, but the Navy had misleadingly recruited women by using the enticement to "Join the Navy and see the world." Naval regulations, however, prohibited women from going to sea. As a result, nearly all served Stateside.<sup>14</sup> Toward the end of the war, the Marine Corps and Coast Guard also enlisted women. In August 1918, for example, after the devastating losses at the Marne (7,800 US Marine casualties), 305 Marine Reservists (F) were recruited to fill clerical jobs Stateside to free men to fight overseas<sup>15</sup>. At the end of the war, all these enlisted women were involuntarily discharged, but they did receive the same benefits as men.<sup>16</sup>

The approximate total of military "pay roll sponsored" women that served in the American military establishment in the war was 34,000<sup>17</sup>. Unlike the enlisted women discussed above, however, most of these 34,000 women served as nurses (22,956) in an auxiliary capacity in either the Army or Navy Nurse Corps.<sup>18</sup> In this case, "auxiliary" status meant that nurses had no official military rank, and were neither compensated with pay commensurate with that of the

men, nor did they receive military benefits after the war.<sup>19</sup> While the nurses were not credited as full-fledged military service members, approximately 10,000 of them served overseas in England, France, Belgium, Italy, Serbia, Siberia, and various US Territories.<sup>20</sup> Their brave and invaluable service in the field hospitals, in other types of hospitals, and in troop trains and transport ships put them at risk to battlefield proximity hazards and exposure to both the harmful ‘mustard’ gas from the casualties they treated and the terrible breakout of influenza in 1918. As testimony to their bravery and dedication, several hundred were wounded and killed (none from direct combat), and many were decorated. Thirty-eight of these patriots were buried overseas.<sup>21</sup>

Army and Navy nurses were not the only women in “harm’s way” during the war. The Red Cross supported the War Department’s effort by sending the first 250 nurses overseas, then recruiting nurses for the Army and Navy, eventually sending 4,610 morale services workers to France.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) company was responsible for providing more than 220 bilingual (French and English) telephone operators, affectionately called “Hello Girls” to augment the U.S. Army Signal Corps in France.<sup>23</sup> Equally important were the 350 women doctors, 160 reconstruction aides, hundreds of Salvation Army workers and 3,480 YMCA volunteers who also served in Europe. Despite the requests of

<b>Enlisted Women of Armed Services:</b>	
Naval Reserve Yeomen (F):	11,882
Marine Reserve (F):	305
<b>Total:</b>	<b>12,187</b>
<b>Auxiliary Forces of Armed Services (Appointed vs. Commissioned):</b>	
Army Nurse Corps:	21,480
Navy Nurse Corps:	1,386
<b>Total:</b>	<b>22,866</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Paramilitary Hired by Military:</b>	
Women Doctors (overseas):	350
Reconstruction Aids	160
Bi-lingual Telephone Operators:	233
Red Cross Workers (approx):	4,600
YMCA Workers:	3,480
Salvation Army	?
<b>Total:</b>	<b>8,823+</b>

TABLE 1: WOMEN SERVING IN WWI BOTH MILITARY AND CIVILIAN

General Pershing, Commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, for the Army to enlist 5,000 women soldiers for clerical duties overseas, there was still too much cultural resistance within the War Department, principally over morality concerns, to change the regulations and enable women to enlist.<sup>24</sup> Table 1 above depicts the service status of U.S. women during WWI. Clearly, U.S. women significantly contributed to the Allied victory. None of them, however, served as combatants, nor were they even in a role that required them to carry arms. Ironically, while this was the first war to include women as full-fledged Service members (all except the Army), regulations and cultural barriers prevented nearly all enlisted women from serving overseas. However, auxiliaries, volunteers, or contracted women did serve in-theater.

#### MILITARY WOMEN OF GREAT BRITAIN

The British had greater numbers of women participating in the war effort than did the United States, but their status as “soldiers” and participation in the war was more haphazard and reticent. By the war’s end, approximately 100,000 British women had participated in one of three roles: civilian volunteers, nurses, and women’s military units. At the beginning of the war, most women participants were either volunteers or Red Cross nurses. By the end of the war, women had pioneered a new role for themselves by moving from rear area civilian nursing to combat nurses on the battlefield. Unlike the U.S., which fielded a single Nurse Auxiliary Corps for each Service, Britain had six different women’s medical organizations providing First Aid Workers, Ambulance Drivers, and Nurses. Such overlap of effort reflected the decentralized and haphazard method of mobilization inhibited by the public’s concerns over women in the military, which was eventually overcome by necessity.

By the end of the war, Britain had created units of uniformed military women who were paid for by the Armed Services. After great losses at the front and even the consideration of drafting 50-year-olds, the British military prepared to utilize women soldiers to augment male troops in rear areas, and free the male soldiers for combat. In early 1917, the British formed Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps, providing 12,000 women for overseas service. By the end of the year, the British established the Women’s Royal Navy Service, but they performed shore duty only. Finally in 1918, the British established the Women’s Royal Air Force in support of the newly formed Royal Air Force. About 80,000 women served in these three quasi-military organizations. Despite the incorporation of women’s military units during the war, the status of women was still ambiguous: They were “enrolled” rather than enlisted (by the Minister of Labour, not the military); their uniforms and insignia were different; they had no parallel ranks to

the men; they had different disciplinary codes; and they were simultaneously given military designation but were referred to as civilians.

Most of these integration problems stemmed from Great Britain's conservative views of women. For the most part, citizens held a traditional view of military women as treading on the male preserve and violating social conceptions of femininity. A secondary issue, but one that the government worked hard to allay, was the concern over sexual promiscuity, exacerbated by the "mixing of the classes" in a military setting. In addition to moralists' concerns that there would be a rash of extramarital sex and illegitimate children, another source of resistance to women in the military came from those who wanted to contain the expanding feminist movement.

Clearly, women's participation was woven deeply into the fabric of the nation's war machine. British women served as clerks, drivers communication workers and logisticians. While many of these women were decorated for their service and some were killed in the line of duty, none were ever allowed to serve in a combatant role. None of them received combat training or carried weapons. In the United Kingdom in WWI, women progressed from a position of working "for" the Armed Services to working "with" them, but only in support roles.<sup>25</sup>

#### MILITARY WOMEN OF GERMANY

Unlike British women, German women of WWI were allowed to support the war effort, but strictly as civilians—not as soldiers, nor as uniformed civilians. Although the Germans were fighting a two-front war and were desperate for able-bodied combatants, they consistently held ultraconservative ideas that warfare was for men and that women did not belong, even in a paramilitary role. This cultural barrier was rooted in the Junker ethic that celebrated the glory and honor of war and of the male warrior.<sup>26</sup>

Despite efforts by German Army Chief of Staff, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, who requested that industrial labor service laws be enacted for both men and women, the Chancellor and Reichstag opposed using women in industrial support roles. Instead, they ratified a compulsory service act in industry for men only, ages 17 to 60. As a remedial step, the German War Office established Women's Work Centers (*Frauenarbeitsstellen*). By the end of the war there were 700,000 women industrial war workers, primarily in the armaments sector. As manpower shortages mounted in the spring of 1917, the German General Staff took the drastic measure of appealing in the German press for women to accept paid jobs in army rear-areas to free men to fight. This Rear-Area Women's Auxiliary program attracted several hundred volunteers from the working class, and they were hired as laborers in supply and ammo depots,

veterinary hospitals, and as clerical office workers (*Etappenhelferinnen*). While these women took jobs previously held by soldiers, they were serving as civilians and did not wear uniforms.

Unlike the other industrialized nations of WWI, the Germans continued to use civilian nurses throughout the war. Of the 100,000 women nurses who served, 90 percent came from the German Red Cross—the rest from various religious organizations. The only other role for women during the war was in the telecommunications field. Five-hundred female volunteers were trained to replace Army signaliers, but none were deployed prior to the end of the war.

Despite their desperate need for manpower, the German government held rigidly to its nation's traditional gender-roles and minimized the use of women. While Germany utilized women to support the war as civilian nurses and in limited rear-area clerical work, none of them had military status, wore a military uniform, or had any arms training. In fact, it was not until 1975 that the first women gained military status and were accepted into the Bundeswehr.<sup>27</sup>

### **RUSSIAN MILITARY WOMEN AND THEIR UNPRECEDENTED ROLE**

You have seen such a sight as has never before been known in human history. It is an epochal thing. It has never been known in all human annals that women should go to war in an organized group to kill men or to be killed themselves.

—William Shepherd<sup>28</sup>

Russia, like other nations in WWI, utilized women in the military. But unlike any other nation, Russian policy evolved to use large populations of women in combatant roles. They sporadically involved women during Russia's nineteenth century wars, but like elsewhere in Europe, Russian women played no significant role until 1914.<sup>29</sup> The evolution of Russian women's service in combat occurred in three phases, all of which mirrored the changes triggered by the two Russian Revolutions of 1917.<sup>30</sup> The first phase lasted from the onset of the War in August 1914 until March (February) 1917, when the monarchy fell after the First Revolution.<sup>31</sup> The second lasted approximately eight months under the Provisional Government, which was overthrown by the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917. Then the third phase unfolded during the Civil War (1918-1920), after Russia withdrew from WWI. This paper examines the first two phases, which culminated in the large-scale transition of women into combatants, in great detail. The third phase is beyond the scope of this research. Much of this would have been possible, however, without Maria Bochkareva, arguably the most important female participant of this transition. She served as a soldier in the Tsarist Army during the war and later became the organizer of Russian Women's Battalion of Death under the Provisional Government.

## TSARIST PERIOD (1914-1917)

When the war began in 1914, the Tsarist regime under Nicholas II had no provision for women to serve in the military, with the exception of nursing, a tradition that dated back to the Crimean War (1854-1855). In addition to military nurses, some aristocratic women set up bandage points and manned hospital trains. Women also served the war effort by working in factories and made up nearly half of the nation's industrial labor force by 1917.<sup>32</sup> Women's direct participation in the military during the Tsarist period, however, came principally in the form of women serving in infantry and cavalry units disguised as men with assumed male names. Although the government regarded military service as a male profession, there were numerous well-documented accounts of women who joined the army and fought as soldiers without governmental resistance, even when their true gender was discovered. This movement of women into combat roles began with individual enlistments or with small groups of girls volunteering together. While there were cases of some women serving openly as women, most served "undercover." One news article in June 1915 speculated that there were "no fewer than 400 women bearing arms" and that most of those were in the Siberian regiments.<sup>33</sup> Other sources estimated that these women serving as 'soldiers', in combination with the volunteer nurses, amounted to approximately 1,000 women participating in the war before the March 1917 Revolution. In addition to ground soldiers, there is also some documentation of women aviators serving in the aviation units.<sup>34</sup>

*The Westminster Gazette* identified Apolloyna Isoltsey as possibly the first known woman enlistee of WWI. At the start of the War, according to the *Gazette*, she volunteered to serve in the regiment commanded by her father and was awarded the Cross of St. George Third Degree, Russia's highest award for bravery for an enlisted soldier, after discovering a hidden enemy telephone that had been used for intelligence collection.<sup>35</sup>

Olga Jehlweiser, was another female soldier. A Lithuanian serving in the Russian cavalry in WWI, she was reported to also have fought earlier in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) under General Rennenkampf. According to *Literary Digest*, as a veteran she brought valuable experience to her unit in WWI, especially when fighting on familiar territory.<sup>36</sup>

Outro Rossii, a Moscow journalist, reported in 1915 that there were considerable numbers of Russian women soldiers who were not only serving in the military, but who were also being recognized for conspicuous gallantry at the front. He recognized that women soldiers came



FIGURE 2: UNKNOWN RUSSIAN SOLDIER

from all classes and normally assumed male names and clothing. He also reported on four women soldiers who were awarded the St. George's Cross Fourth Degree for their exceptional bravery. Their stories reveal the context in which women soldiers participated. The first, Maria Selivanova, 17, ran away from a girls' high school and joined the army at the front under the name of Stepan. She distinguished herself by carrying wounded soldiers from the front trenches. Ekaterina Linevska, 23, left work in a cotton mill, assumed the name of Ivan Solovieff, put on a soldier's greatcoat and cap, and attached herself as a volunteer to a rifle regiment. She was recognized for her daring reconnaissance of German advance posts, during which she was severely wounded. The third woman, Matvey Koloboff, enlisted in the army as soon as the war started. At the time of the article, she was known only by her male name. Her bravery was formally recognized after she single-handedly captured two Austrian scouts. Lastly, Rossii reported on Nina Rumiantseva, 16, who saved an officer's life under conditions of extreme danger.<sup>37</sup>

Women could not become combatants without the complicity of military officials. In Russia and the World (1915), Stephen Graham observed that hundreds of girls had left home in boys' clothes to enlist as volunteers. Several made it through the medical examination since it was only a negligible formality in some locations and wholly neglected in others.<sup>38</sup> In the pamphlet, "Battalion of Death," (1919), Wasyl D. Kurdyla related the story of a 17-year old Nina Mironova, daughter of an aristocrat, who enlisted in the Army after her father was killed in battle. She was well-connected socially in Petrograd and was thus easily able to influence the bureaucracy to allow her to join as a male. She cut her hair, changed her name to Private Lomov, and kept to herself in the unit. Kurdyla wrote that the men initially ridiculed her unmanliness, but they eventually accepted this different type of soldier after she had performed well.<sup>39</sup> In addition to the women's willingness to hide their gender to enlist, other accounts reveal that sympathizers to their cause were instrumental in enabling them to join a combat unit. Zoya Smirnov, a 16-year old girl who had been fighting in a combat unit for 14 months, recounted how she and her girl friends were able to infiltrate into a unit. After sneaking away from home and finding a unit headed off to the front, she reported: "The soldiers treated the little patriots quite paternally and properly, and having concealed them in the cars took them off to war. A military uniform was obtained for each; they donned these and unobstructed arrived at the Austrian frontier, where they had to detrain and on foot proceed to Lemberg (today's Iriv). Here the regimental authorities found out what had happened, but not being able to persuade the young patriots to return home allowed them to march with the regiment."<sup>40</sup> These accounts offer some insights into the Russian mindset at the time. Some historians, such as Richard



Stities, surmise that problems of integration were never discussed at the higher levels of the military under the Tsarist regime, rather it was more of a policy of “turning official eyes the other way.” It seems the appearance of women scattered throughout various units was an unplanned and perhaps fortunate turn of events in meeting manpower requirements.<sup>41</sup> Encouraged by official ambivalence, many determined and brave-hearted girls and women found it possible to join Russian combat units, their gender notwithstanding.

The acceptance of women in nontraditional roles occurred at both the tactical and strategic levels principally because of the more egalitarian worldview of the Russians toward gender, and the nation’s sheer desperation to man such an extended front.<sup>42</sup> Unlike the more industrialized nations of America, Great Britain and Germany, the predominantly poor Russian populace of the time was more tolerant of hardship and was not wedded to the same Western mindset that assumed the fragility and delicacy of women.<sup>43</sup> For most of the peasantry, life was generally hard. This reduced the gender-gap bias amongst peers and contributed to the ambivalence of the military leaders and their lack of Western angst over potential sexual promiscuity if the sexes were mixed in warfare. A British press account reporting on this phenomenon of women warriors tried to explain the cultural differences of Russian life as compared to the world-view of Great Britain:

There appears to be no sex–antagonism in Russia. Indeed the line of sex cleavage is of the very faintest. Men and women do not lead separate lives. They work side by side normally, whether in the fields, or as students of medicine, politics, and the like in the universities. And as every one knows, there are (or were before the war changed everything) as many women Anarchists as men. It is only natural that the lionhearted and adventurous should desire to share in the great adventure.<sup>44</sup>

In short, Russian culture, coupled with demands of the war, produced an environment of semi-tolerance and ambivalence toward women in combat.

Germany was fully aware its soldiers were fighting Russian female combatants. Germany’s Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Dr Alfred Zimmermann, commenting on the legality of executing Edith Cavell as a spy– whom he considered patriotic–implied that Russia’s female soldiers should be regarded the same as men. He noted that Russian girls who have “fought against us in soldiers’ uniforms” were currently among their prisoners of war, and he questioned if one of these girls had been killed in battle whether the world would condemn Germany as barbaric.<sup>45</sup> The answer was rhetorical; he made his point that both men and

women were equal under the law. If women participated in war, they too ran the same risks that men had previously borne alone in the past.

While women's participation in combat units as women may have been outside the bounds of official policy, some women, such as Maria Bochkareva, were granted special waivers. Bochkareva, probably the most publicized Russian women soldier of the war, was permitted in 1914 to join the Army and serve openly as a woman in an infantry unit on the Eastern Front.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, *The Literary Digest* of June 1915



FIGURE 3: COLONEL KOKOVETSEVA

profiled Madame (Colonel) Kokovetseva for receiving the Cross of St. George while openly serving as the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ural Cossack Regiment. The article also featured a photograph of her wearing her ribbons, a bandage around her head from her war wounds, and standing next to her rifle. It reported that she was wounded twice while fighting in East Prussia. In addition to the medal for bravery, she was promised a military pension after the war. She too joined as a combatant at the beginning of the war, joining the same Cossack Regiment in which her husband had previously served.<sup>47</sup> She must have been fairly well known, as various photos of her can still be found. (See Figure 3)

The Cossack regiments may have been the most liberal about allowing women to serve openly as women. *The Literary Digest* of 19 June 1915 featured another "gallant girl-officer," named Alexandra Ephimovna Lagareva. She and six men of her detachment were captured by the Germans and locked in a church. At some point, they broke a window and escaped, and Lagareva killed the sentry with a stone in the process. On their way back to their unit, they recovered their horses and subsequently captured a patrol of 18 enemy soldiers carrying valuable documents for higher headquarters.<sup>48</sup> Here again was a case involving women who not only participated, but led men in dangerous and physically demanding exploits.

Western press reports related similar stories in 1916 of females participating as combatants. *The New York Times* reported on a group of 12 Russian high school girls from Moscow, ranging from 14 to 16 years of age: They ran away from home without telling their parents to "see war and ourselves kill the Germans." Responding to their youthful and patriotic ideals, the men soldiers assisted them in getting uniforms. Further, they were allowed to stay after persuading the regimental authorities of their irreversible desire to serve. Each of the girls was given a masculine surname and, according to the article, they were integrated with no problems. According to the article: "The regiment traversed the whole of Galicia; scaled the Carpathians, incessantly participating in battle, and the girls never fell back from it a step, but

shared with the men all the privations and horrors of the march and discharged the duties of ordinary privates, since they were taught to shoot and were given rifles." The article reported that at least one of the girls had been killed, while others were starting to separate from the initial band due to extended hospitalizations from wounds as well as the mobility of units along the front.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, these were remarkable stories for American or British readers of the day. At that point in history, no other nation would have even conceived of allowing women, much less girls, to carry rifles, kill the enemy, and live in an integrated environment with men in the field and in the trenches.

## THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT PERIOD (1917)

### Overview

The March 1917 Revolution in Russia created a climate for drastic social change in many areas, one of which impacted women in the military. This Revolution of the people happened quickly, but the dramatic clash of value systems had been rumbling for decades. The Russian monarchy—which had stood for autocratic order, hierarchy, privilege, and patriarchy—was challenged by a complex mix of proponents for civil rights, labor reform, bread for the masses, women’s rights, equitable land sharing, and power plays from various political factions.<sup>50</sup> On 13 March 1917, the Tsar abdicated both his throne and the Romanov Dynasty came to an end.<sup>51</sup> Royal authority was replaced by a new Russian Revolutionary Provisional Government, which was eventually lead by Alexander Kerensky, a socialist lawyer. Kerensky, initially the Minister of Justice and subsequently the Minister of War for the new government, initiated several changes that drastically impacted the Army. He abolished capital punishment and created many civil liberties, including the right of soldiers to establish committees (Soviets) to decide how they would fight.<sup>52</sup> This “reform” resulted in massive desertions and a serious breakdown in the chain of command’s ability to prosecute the war.<sup>53</sup> As a socialist, Kerensky planned to introduce universal suffrage and was receptive to opening the military to women. At one point, he met with Maria Bochkareva, a woman soldier just returning from the front. He supported her appeal for the creation of an all-women’s combat unit as a means of promoting patriotism and shaming men back into fighting.



FIGURE 4: MARIA BOCHKAREVA

With the government's support, Bochkareva subsequently organized and commanded the "Women's Battalion of Death."<sup>54</sup> Battalions of Death developed during the Provisional Government period—composed of volunteers who pledged their lives to Russia and would never retreat. Although Bochkareva's Women's Battalion of Death was the only women's unit to see combat at the front, its arguable success led the Kerensky government to organize additional women's combat units. Estimates from various sources suggest that approximately 5,000 to 6,000 women were serving in the military by November 1917, when the Bolshevik Revolution overthrew the Provisional Government.<sup>55</sup>

### **Maria Bochkareva**

Without question, Maria Bochkareva was the most significant figure in the panorama of people who played a role in the unprecedented use of women in the military during WWI. Of all the women covered by the Western press during the War, Bochkareva, was arguably, the centerpiece. She grew up as an illiterate, poor, peasant girl. She became a decorated soldier, rose to command the first women's combat unit, and capitalizing on her notoriety, gained access and influence with the highest government and military leaders of her time. An ardent patriot, she was committed to fighting the Germans above all else, which caused her to be branded as a counterrevolutionary by the Bolsheviks after they seized power. At the risk of her own safety, she evaded Bolshevik agents and traveled to the United States to garner government support for Russia's fight against Germany. After returning to Russia and working with the White Russian movement, which collapsed in 1920, the Bolsheviks arrested and executed her. While in America, she dictated her memoir *Yashka: My Life as Peasant, Officer and Exile* (1919) to Isaac Don Levine, a Russian-speaking American writer.<sup>56</sup> In the book, she revealed her complicity with the White Russian movement, which probably contributed to her eventual fate at the hands of the Bolsheviks.<sup>57</sup> More importantly, her memoirs remain the single-most revealing document and social commentary pertaining to the service of a woman in a Tsarist men's combat unit and in a Provisional Government all-women's combat unit.

### **Bochkareva's Early Years**

Bochkareva's peasant upbringing, conditioned by hardship and toil, was probably typical of other women who served successfully as combatants in WWI. Maria Leontievna Bochkareva, the third of four daughters, was born in July 1889 to poor peasant parents, Leoni Semenovitch and Olga Eleazarovna Frolkov, in Nikolsko village in the Novgorod District.<sup>58</sup> By the time she was eight years old, the family moved to Tomsk in Siberia. They arrived barefoot in

tattered clothing and were forced to find shelter in a stable. Because employment opportunities were scarce and her father was a “lazy” alcoholic, she was forced, at the age of eight, to work as a caretaker of another child to help keep food on the table for her family. When her employment did not work out, she found another job, which lasted five years, as an apprentice to the village grocery store owner. At 14, Maria became the main breadwinner for the family, since her mother was chronically ill, and her father was almost always drunk and beating the family, which made her sisters chose to stay away. At 15, she became totally dissatisfied with her lot in life as she worked from sunrise to sunset trying to ward off starvation for her family. She regretted her ‘bleak, purposeless, futureless existence,’ to the point of trying to get sick and perhaps die.<sup>59</sup>

As a young woman, fatalism and resilience tempered Bochkareva’s personality as she faced more privation and misery. The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) brought new life to her town as it teemed with soldiers and new businesses. She fell in love with a Lieutenant Vasili Lazov, but was unable to marry him because of class differences. After discovering the affair, her father beat her and her mother so badly that she again considered suicide. In early 1905, she met a soldier, Afansi Botchkarev, who was visiting from the front, “a common moujik (peasant), of rough appearance and vulgar speech, and at least ten years older than myself.” To escape her father’s brutal hand, she married Afanasi, but he soon began beating her too. For two years they lived together and both worked at an asphalt firm making floors. Afanasi’s drinking and subsequent beatings became so brutal that she escaped by train, where she was forced to exchange sexual favors with the gendarme. Later she found work on a steamship in her sister’s town of Barnaul. When her husband eventually found her, she tried to get away by jumping off the ship. She survived the near drowning, but made secret plans to escape as he continued to beat her both publicly and privately. Their relationship got so bad at one point that Maria was going to kill Afanasi with an ax. Her father prevented the murder, but Afanasi’s obvious shortcomings enabled her to leave him without condemnation from her family. Having obtained a passport, but with no money, she resourcefully hid herself on a train to Irkutsk, where her sister had moved. She found work as an asphalt contractor and was eventually made the foreman over 25 men. Here she acquired invaluable experience working with men and supervising them. She worked at this job for a year without any days off and eventually ended up in the Kuznetzov Hospital for two months to recover from exhaustion.<sup>60</sup>

At 21, Maria’s situation had become even more desperate. Her sister had moved; she was penniless; she had no job. She decided to poison herself. However, Yakov Buk, a 24-year old from a butcher’s family, came to her rescue. He brought her into his family’s home, and they

were eventually “married” by civil agreement. They established their own butcher shop and lived together fairly happily for about three years. While Yasha, as he was called, seemed nicer, he turned out to be a former convict from the Irkutsk prison who had become affiliated with many political prisoners there.<sup>61</sup>

In May 1912, everything changed for the worse when Yakov was arrested for harboring a political fugitive in their home. After a series of amazing sacrifices, to include voluntary imprisonment, Maria eventually was able to join her “civil partner” in exile at Yakutsk in July 1913.<sup>62</sup> To circumvent Yakov’s new relocation orders to Kolymsk on the Arctic Circle, she was coerced into secretly sleeping with the Irkutsk General-Governor.<sup>63</sup> But that only led to her attempted suicide and Yakov’s jealous attempt to murder the Governor. Soon after, Yakov was exiled to Amga, where he fell into a cycle of drinking, gambling, and beating Maria.<sup>64</sup> In August 1914, after he almost succeeded in killing her by hanging her from a noose, Maria heard the news of a great war. She recalled, “My soul was gripped, and I had a dim realization of a new world coming to life, a purged world, a happier and Godlier one.”<sup>65</sup> She escaped her husband by trekking through the snow for six nights to get to Yakutsk, 150 miles away. From there, she was able to obtain transport to her hometown of Tomsk, arriving two months later.<sup>66</sup> At this point, she decided to abandon her role as a daughter and wife. She would no longer be subjugated to beatings and hard labor an illiterate peasant who barely made enough to survive. From here forward, she decided to go to war and find purpose for her life: “A voice within me called, ‘Go to war and help save thy country!’”<sup>67</sup> Her hard life had conditioned her well for facing the rigors of military service in the Russian Army.<sup>68</sup>

### **Bochkareva as a Soldier**

Before joining the Army, Bochkareva returned to her parents’ home in Tomsk. In November 1914, against their wishes, she went to the 25<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion headquarters to enlist. But the adjutant declared, “The regulations do not permit us to enlist women. It is against the law.”<sup>69</sup> The commander of the reserve unit recommended that she serve as a Red Cross nurse or in some other auxiliary capacity. Rejecting that proposal, Bochkareva borrowed money from her mother to send a telegram to the Tsar asking permission to enlist. To everyone’s surprise, according to her memoirs, the Tsar approved her request. Though they cropped her hair and issued her a male uniform, she was openly enlisted as a woman in the Fourth Company, Fifth Regiment. Her integration in the barracks with the male soldiers during the training camp period was initially rough, but within a week or so she established “proper relations with the men.” She was a quick learner and soon gained the respect of her fellow

soldiers, who showed their acceptance by adopting her pet name of "Yashka." She received three months of training with the men; in early 1915, she went to the front to fight at Polotsk with the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, 2<sup>nd</sup> Army.<sup>70</sup>

After the third day at the front, Bochkareva's unit was sent forward to the trenches to fight. According to her memoirs, she joined a fierce battle. At some point, only 48 of the original 250 soldiers made it back alive to the trenches. Without orders, Bochkareva slipped over the wire into No Man's Land to retrieve wounded company mates. She claimed to have carried approximately 50 men back to the trenches and was subsequently recommended by her commander for an Order of the 4<sup>th</sup> Degree medal, "for distinguished valor shown in the saving of many lives under fire."<sup>71</sup> Later in the same battle, she was wounded in the leg and evacuated to Kiev for medical treatment

Two months later, she returned to her unit and was received as a hero by her fellow soldiers. She recounted several episodes of fighting and raiding-party activities at the front. In one episode, on 15 August 1915, her Regiment was involved in a great victory and was recognized for capturing 2,000 prisoners. During the engagement, she was again wounded, this time in the hand and arm while rendering aid under fire. She was recommended for the Cross of St George Forth Degree, but was later advised that she could not receive the coveted medal because she was a woman.<sup>72</sup>

In the winter, her unit moved to a location identified as Zelenoye Polie; she served here as a medical assistant in charge of 12 stretcher-bearers. After a terrible battle, she and her team worked for two weeks to extract 500 corpses. In this capacity, she was awarded a Gold Medal of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree and she was later promoted to the rank of Corporal, placed in charge of 11 men, and sent back to the front ranks. As a non-commissioned officer, she volunteered to be a part of a thirty-man scouting team. Her team encountered an enemy patrol and Bochkareva killed a German soldier by bayoneting him in the stomach. After several close encounters during that raid, she was one of ten soldiers to make it back to the trenches. She reported that the rest of the winter of 1915 was bitterly cold. Food and equipment were running short. She nearly lost her right foot from frostbite and spent the early days of 1916 in the hospital recovering.<sup>73</sup>

In March 1916, Bochkareva participated in horrific fighting during the Battle of Postovy. Later that month, a bullet shattered her right leg bone as her Regiment was retreating across No Man's Land. She was evacuated to Moscow for three months until she was fit to return to her unit in June on the Lutzk front. On 22 June, during a charge against the enemy with fixed bayonets, shrapnel lodged in the base of her spine and paralyzed her. Her situation was initially

precarious, but she was successfully evacuated to Kiev and hospitalized for six months. She amazingly recovered from the paralysis after four months of no movement and learned to walk again.<sup>74</sup>

In December 1916, while traveling to rejoin her regiment, she noticed a growing demoralization in the Army as the war dragged on: "The government machinery was breaking down. The soldiers had lost faith in their superiors, and the view that they were being led to slaughter by the thousands prevailed in many minds. Rumors flew thick and fast. The old soldiers were killed off and the fresh drafts were impatient for the end of the war. The spirit of 1914 was no more."<sup>75</sup> But not everything had changed for the worse. Determined to keep her spirit high, she rejoined her unit after returning, and was honored by a dinner with the Commander of the Regiment and its officers. At the dinner, they awarded her a Cross of the Third Degree and promoted her to the grade of senior under-officer (non-commissioned officer). She was subsequently given command of a 70-man platoon.

Bochkareva next related how she and 500 Russian soldiers were suddenly captured by the Germans and interrogated. She described how friendly reinforcements came and how they "engaged in ferocious hand-to-hand combat." After being a captive for eight hours, she managed to escape, using four enemy hand grenades to kill ten German soldiers. For this escapade and some harrowing rescues afterwards, she was awarded another Cross of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree. Not long afterward, early in 1917 she and her patrol surprised a four-man German listening post, killing two of the Germans and bringing the other two back as prisoners. She was congratulated by her commander and once more, recommended for the Gold Cross of the 1<sup>st</sup> Degree.<sup>76</sup> Without question, Bochkareva was recognized throughout the Russian Army as a brave and proven soldier. Despite the hardships of fighting in the bitter cold and in the vermin-infested trenches and her many wounds, her experience testified that some women could serve as combatants with distinction.

### **Bochkareva's Experience at the Front During the Revolution of February 1917**

At the beginning of 1917, demoralization in the Russian Army grew. Amidst "dark rumors" about the death of Grigorii Rasputin, whose undue influence over the Tsar and Tsarina had created a scandal at Court, and allegations of improper connections between the Tsar's Court and Germany, Bochkareva believed "a spirit of insubordination was growing in the soldiers' midst." Soldiers were becoming weary after four winters at the front with no end to the war in sight; most had even forgotten why they were fighting. There was a growing "indignation and suppressed dissatisfaction of the rank and file."<sup>77</sup>



News of the March 1917 Revolution was received with joy in Bochkareva's unit. Bochkareva welcomed the news: "The miracle had happened! Tsarism, which enslaved us and thrived on our blood and marrow of the toiler, had fallen. Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood!" As free citizens with newly won liberties, they all swore allegiance to the Provisional Government and were prepared to make any sacrifice to drive Germans out of their homeland. The Regimental Commander gathered the entire unit to read them the Provisional Government's first manifesto, Order Number 1. It explained that soldiers and officers were now equal, like all citizens in Free Russia. It also stipulated that the army was to be ruled by committees established at every level: company, regimental, army and corps. The decentralization of authority, however, had dire consequences for the Army. Within a few days, the initial celebration changed to endless meetings and political speeches. "All duty was abandoned in the first few days," Bochkareva recalled, adding that fighting had ceased, soldiers were mesmerized by the speeches, and troops refused to obey her military orders, as well as the orders of her commanders. After a few changes in the officer chain of command and various speeches about the new government's leadership, some discipline in the ranks was gradually restored. Although the new laxness led to the beginnings of fraternization with the enemy, soldiers responded positively to the appeals of the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet to carry on the war for the protection of the Mother-Russia. By the spring of 1917, there was a semblance of discipline with soldiers, but it was based on a sense of responsibility rather than on fear.<sup>78</sup>

According to Bochkareva, the soldiers' faith in how the new authorities would handle the concerns of the common peasants quickly subsumed their newly sworn allegiances. Political issues became a persistent distraction to troops at the front. They were concerned about what the bourgeoisie were doing and how the land ownership issues would be resolved. Generally, they wondered if they should continue to sacrifice at the front while everyone else was looting in the rear. Would they come home and find that the wealth of the country had already been distributed without them? In this uneasy environment, with briefly found discipline fading, Bochkareva decided she no longer wanted to participate as a soldier.

Then a fateful meeting with Mikhail Rodzianko, the President of the Duma, who was visiting her sector, changed her decision. Bochkareva was singled out and introduced to him as a real hero. Afterwards, she told him of her disillusionment over what had happened to the readiness of the army; she indicated she wanted to go home because she believed she was no longer contributing to the defense of her country. Surprisingly, Rodzianko, who was greatly impressed with her, recommended that she return to Petrograd with him. She agreed.<sup>79</sup> The

meeting with Rodzianko signaled an important transition. This woman of high ideals and patriotic fervor would now move from serving her country at the tactical and individual level to serving at the strategic and national level.

### **Bochkareva as the Commander of the Women's Battalion of Death**

After returning from the front as an infantry sergeant, Bochkareva gained access to the most influential Russian leaders of the day and became a central figure in the Provisional Government's plans to reform the Army. One day in May 1917, she met with President Rodzianko in Petrograd. At their meeting she first learned about the Bolsheviks, such as Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and Alexandra Kollontai, and how their propaganda was causing soldiers to refuse orders to go to the front. Later that day, Rodzianko took Bochkareva to the Taurida Palace, where she was introduced to many government delegates and discussed the widespread problems of discipline in the Army.<sup>80</sup> Rodzianko gave Bochkareva the opportunity to suggest her solution to the problem. After a brief time to think it over, she responded with the innovative idea of recommending the formation of an all-women's "Battalion of Death." Her proposal aroused sensibilities and precipitated immediate objections. But Bochkareva argued that she could recruit and train "three hundred women like me to serve as an example to the army and lead the men into battle." Furthermore, she explained that though the numbers of women would be small, they would serve as an example to the entire front, and they would "shame the men" into fighting. She also made it clear that her unit would be founded on rigid discipline without committees; she guaranteed their obedience and moral behavior.<sup>81</sup> Rodzianko liked the idea and had a great deal of faith in Bochkareva. He arranged to have her submit the idea for approval through the Commander in Chief, General Alexei Brusilov, and then to Kerensky, the Minister of War. Within two days she met General Brusilov, received his concurrence for the plan, and then on 15 May she presented her idea to Kerensky at the Winter Palace. He too endorsed the plan. His only concern was in maintaining "the high standard of morality" in the organization. Bochkareva pledged herself for the conduct of her soldiers, and she was assured that General Peter Polovtsoff, the Garrison Commander of Petrograd, would provide her the necessary resources.

On the evening of 21 May, Bochkareva was granted the opportunity to publicly announce and solicit support for her plan. At the Mariynski Theater, positioned to speak between Kerensky and Rodzianko, she made a plea to women in the audience to make sacrifices for their country and join the "Women's Battalion of Death." The enthusiastic crowd responded: 1,500 women were ready to enlist that night! After further newspaper appeals for female

fighters, a total of 2,000 women initially volunteered to enlist in the unit.<sup>82</sup> General Polovtsoff provided the newly forming unit with the Kolomensk Women's Institute as their base of operation. His staff also provided them with uniforms, kits, arms, ammunition and drill instructors.<sup>83</sup> While some of the equipment like boots and rifles were delayed in arriving, Bochkareva used 40 male drill instructors and organized her unit into two battalions of a thousand women each. Both battalions were further subdivided into four companies, and the companies into four platoons each. Until women leaders could be identified during the training, the male instructors commanded each platoon, with petty officers commanding each company.<sup>84</sup>

At the beginning of the training period, Bochkareva thought they would only have two weeks to train. But they actually trained for six weeks before they boarded trains headed for the front.<sup>85</sup> Even six weeks, however, offered minimal opportunity to organize, equip, and in-process a brand new unit of raw civilian recruits in the art of warfare, to select the best troops for leadership positions, to train the newly selected leaders on both basic soldier skills and leader skills, to instill in these new "soldiers" a severe form of discipline to which they were not accustomed, and to forge some bonds of comradeship that would link them in combat. These challenges did not take into consideration the psychological challenges for individual recruits to deal with the ridicule of the rebelling male soldiers around Petrograd who were calling them traitors, the stress of disappointing family members by joining the Army as combatants, the stress of assuming a new role as killers, and the fear of being killed or maimed themselves. In the time given to prepare these women for combat, Bochkareva's challenge to provide adequate training and equipping was indeed a daunting task.



FIGURE 5: THE "WOMEN'S BATTALION OF DEATH"

The variety of women who volunteered to join and fight for the survival of Russia ranged across the entire socioeconomic spectrum. The Battalion included women and girls from the aristocracy, proletariat, and peasantry. Rheta Childe Dorr, an American journalist who spent considerable time with the unit, described in Inside the Russian Revolution the composition of the women recruits, which included six Red Cross nurses, a doctor, a lawyer, a stenographer, and even a Cossack.<sup>86</sup> In addition to the mixed social classes, the *Literary Digest* (August 1917) noted that in addition to Russian women, the Battalion included Polish, Estonian, Japanese, and Georgian volunteers. Bochkareva's initial screening process, appears in retrospect, to be less than thorough. Bochkareva acknowledged that the in-processing physicals were "not of the same standard as that required by the men." Indeed, they "rejected only those suffering from serious ailments."<sup>87</sup> Her strict disciplinary regime during the training period, however, seemed to be her intended methodology of rooting out the inappropriate recruits. The *Literary Digest* (August 1917) also reported that the women had to go through a "summary examination" and then take the oath "to conquer or die." To affirm this oath, each woman was required to carry a ration of potassium cyanide, to be taken in the event of capture. They earned the distinction of voluntarily creating the first and only female "Battalion of Death." in the Russian Army.<sup>88</sup>



FIGURE 6: GENERAL POLOVTSOFF WITH MARIA BOCHKAREVA AND THE "WOMEN'S BATTALION OF DEATH"

Contemporary accounts credited the “Women’s Battalion of Death” with high marks in garrison training standards. Highly decorated drill sergeants from the Volynsky Regiment, a famous Russian military unit, trained the women with full devotion.<sup>89</sup> They spent two hours a day in rifle practice and another eight hours in combat training.<sup>90</sup> General Polovtsoff himself, who was invited to the Institute as the reviewing officer for their parade, commented that their drill “was perfect.”<sup>91</sup> An Associated Press reporter at the review noted that the women were marching with an exaggerated goose-step and carried cavalry carbines, which were five pounds lighter than the standard infantry rifle.<sup>92</sup> Other observers recounted that women soldiers in uniforms had become “familiar sights” on the streets of Petrograd. They were most memorable for their shaved or shortly cropped hair, the distinctive white badges on their uniforms that signified a Battalion of Death, their disciplined bearing, and the “smart manner” in which they saluted.<sup>93</sup>

Bessie Beatty, an American journalist who spent time with the Battalion, recounted that the motivation of most of the women was highly patriotic: “Many had joined the regiment because they sincerely believed that the honor, and even the existence, of Russia were at stake and that nothing but a great human sacrifice could save her.”<sup>94</sup> She added that some, “like Bochkareva” upon her initial enlistment from Siberia, also joined to escape the unbearable drudgery of their seemingly hopeless lives. Beyond patriotism and the view that enlisting in the army was a better life option, there were also quite a few women who became soldiers out of a sense of duty to rally the men back into the fight. Dorr further reported that the women “feared the further demoralization of the troops”, believing that they were temporarily suffering from “a sickness of the soul.” These women had seen the men desert in masses, a highly dishonorable act for a Russian. They felt that they had no choice but to go in their stead.<sup>95</sup> One of the former Red Cross nurses described how “the men were drunk with freedom” and were killing their officers and even turning on the nurses who had cared for them.<sup>96</sup> William Shepherd, another American journalist, conducted extensive interviews with Russia’s women warriors. He reported that a few fought for revenge, particularly those who had had loved ones killed, but most of them fought for patriotic reasons. Their motivation typically reflected what one woman from Bochkareva’s unit said after being injured in battle: “The men of Russia had refused to fight for their country, and the women of Russia were the only ones left to do their work.” In an article entitled, “The Soul That Stirs in the Battalions of Death,” Shepherd affirmed clearly the women’s greatest reason for fighting: “I say that nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every thousand of these women soldiers went into the war for the main purpose of criticizing by their action the laggard portion of the Russian army and spurring it on – yes, even insulting it on to fight for the

Fatherland.”<sup>97</sup> Certainly, this goal of shaming the men back into fighting was the main reason the women’s units were supported by the politicians. From Bochkareva’s memoirs, it appears that she arrived at the idea of forming a Women’s Battalion of Death without a great deal of thought or deliberation, and most of her volunteers were inspired by an immediate urge of patriotism, yet their shared obligation to help defend Mother Russia seemed to override all other longer-term considerations. There is no evidence that she or any officials in the Kerensky government seriously considered the possibilities of her experiment not working.

One of the biggest threats to the successful formation of the unit and the physical safety of the women soldiers came from recalcitrant male soldiers who were influenced by Bolshevik propaganda. According to Bochkareva, initially Bolshevik agitators were not too concerned about the unit, since they expected it to collapse within a few days. But as it gained support from more constituents and it became evident that the unit observed the strictest discipline, operating without committees, the propagandists began to view the unit as a real political threat. For example, one night as Bochkareva returned to the barracks after a dinner with Kerensky and British Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, who was visiting Petrograd, she was confronted by 35 men who had been waiting for her at the barracks guard house. They attempted to persuade her to disband the unit since they believed there had been enough “militarism and bloodshed.” They saw the Women’s Battalion of Death as promoting war, not peace. After she verbally defied them, the men threatened her with a gun and punched her in the back. At that point Bochkareva told her women soldiers, who were hanging out the windows, to fire. Her dissenters fled. The next night the men returned to the barracks and broke every windowpane fronting the street. Violent attacks against the Women’s Battalion of Death continued before the unit left for the front.<sup>98</sup>

Most of the aggressively violent types were Bolshevik deserters from the army. The anarchists and Bolsheviks used these men to try to stir up the crowds at large gatherings.<sup>99</sup> Often men would hiss and boo at the women soldiers in public as they walked around town. They were notorious for screaming at the women soldiers: “Those women ought not be allowed to go to war. It is a ‘blankety-blank’ insult to Russia and its men!”<sup>100</sup> Many of these angry people claimed that the government was not really going to use the women to fight, but would send them forward as a way of insulting Russian soldiers who wanted peace from the war. Dorr, who accompanied the women on the train out of Petrograd to the front, recounted the dangerous situation caused by the “Leninites” who had gone to the greatest extreme to breed dissension in the ranks. They sent mobs to swarm the entrainment and physically prevent the women from boarding. While the women soldiers fought to board, the chaotic environment also

threatened their farewell wishers. Dorr recalled how restrained men, swarmed at the train stops and shouted angry questions, some of which were attributed to German propagandists: "Who fights for the capitalists? Who fights for English bloodsuckers? We don't fight."<sup>101</sup> Such was the political circumstances into which these brave young women volunteered. Their actions were not only radical for women of their day, but they also unwittingly antagonized the Bolsheviks.

Internal to the unit, the environment was harsh as well. Bochkareva quickly weeded out several hundred women in the first few days of training for minor disciplinary reasons. She decided at the outset that she must be stern and that her decisions must be "final" in order to instill discipline in the unit. Beyond enforcing high professional standards of conduct and doling out harsh punishment, she also strived to make the conditions physically tough.<sup>102</sup> From the very beginning, she established a "Spartan regime" for her women soldiers. For example, she forced them to sleep on boards and allowed no bedclothes as a means of eliminating those enlistees who were not fully committed<sup>103</sup>. She also made the recruits sign a statement that exempted them from the "Kerensky Declaration" of soldiers' rights and insisted they shave or crop their hair. Perhaps part of the reason for Bochkareva's use of strict discipline resulted from the tremendous "burden of responsibility" that she felt to ensure the success of the unit: "The battalion had to be a success or I would be the laughing stock of the country, disgracing at the same time the sponsors of my idea."<sup>104</sup> Whatever the driving factors were, the survivability of these women was riding on how well they were trained in a very short time.

While many of the women soldiers willingly endured the tough discipline and resisted the psychological attacks of the men agitators, most of them eventually revolted against these conditions. For example, one night a Bolshevik agitator gained access into the barracks and appealed to the women to form a committee to govern themselves. He made fun of their "Tsarist" toleration of discipline and successfully appealed to their seemingly unfulfilled status as free citizens, which was supposed to provide them a voice and a vote in the governing of their unit. When Bochkareva arrived on the scene, she was told that the majority of the women recruits had decided that they were going to establish a committee and even alluded to electing a new leader. By force of personality, Bochkareva got them to form into two ranks, those who were with her and those who were not. Those that were not with her were dismissed from the unit, leaving only 300 loyal women. The following day the secessionists sent a delegation to General Polovtsoff to complain of their former leader's methods. Polovtsoff confronted Bochkareva, urging her to change her discipline protocol. But she refused. Later Kerensky called her to the Winter Palace. While Kerensky had originally agreed to exempt the women's

unit from these newly given freedoms due all citizens and soldiers, he now reversed his decision. According to Bochkareva, the argument got so heated that at one point he threatened to “reduce her to dust” if she failed to obey him. Unwilling to adopt a system of committees for her unit, Bochkareva went back to the barracks to disband the unit, her only remaining alternative. The loyal 300 remaining recruits were so distraught at losing their commander and abandoning their shared purpose that they intervened with Polovstov and requested that the leadership reconsider. After heated debates with Bochkareva, he and Kerensky finally relented to her conditions of ultimate discipline.<sup>105</sup>

As frustrated as Kerensky was with Bochkareva's refusal to adopt his policy on relaxation of soldier discipline, it appears that Kerensky tried to exploit as much political capital as he could from the new female unit. One of the male Battalions of Death was comprised of old men in their 70s and even men that were crippled. Kerensky arranged a march of “The Invalids,” the remaining loyal soldiers from the Volynski Regiment's band, and the Women's Battalion, as a Provisional government demonstration to counter a scheduled Bolshevik demonstration. The women's unit carried a banner given to them by General Polovtsoff, which read: “Long live the Provisional Government! Let those who can, Advance! Forward Brave Women! To the Defense of the Bleeding Motherland!” The Captain of the Invalids was concerned about the potential for danger and issued Bochkareva 50 pistols to distribute among her Battalion. The crowds were enormous, and the collision of marchers and ideals erupted into violence. Here again, Bochkareva was nearly killed when she was hit over the head and “grazed” by bullets. With the commander rendered unconscious, her officers took charge and were forced to order the women to shoot into the crowd. Two of the instructors were killed and 10 of the women soldiers were wounded.<sup>106</sup> By June 1917, the Provisional Government was losing the support of the common Russian. Kerensky's use of old men and women to defend the homeland, and convince Russian males of their patriotic responsibilities was not working.

The day after the demonstration, Rodzianko took Bochkareva to the Winter Palace for a fateful meeting with General Lavr Kornilov, who had just been appointed by Kerensky as commander of the Southwestern front.<sup>107</sup> While this meeting in itself was fairly uneventful, it marked the start of a close relationship between Kornilov and Bochkareva. Both Kornilov and Rodzianko recognized the terrible impact that committees were having on maintaining a viable army, and they respected Bochkareva's ability to resist Kerensky on this issue. The common bond between the three later brought them together when Kornilov tried to convince Kerensky to reinstate discipline at the risk of losing the country. While not part of the history of Russian women combatants, Bochkareva's memoirs offer historians an insider's view on the discussions



that eventually led to the “Kornilov incident,” when Kerensky dismissed the General who subsequently attacked Petrograd to wrest power from Kerensky.<sup>108</sup> Bochkareva’s association with Kornilov, who became identified with the counter-revolutionary cause, eventually contributed to her arrest and execution by the Bolsheviks.

On 3 July 1917, the “Women’s Battalion of Death” participated in two ceremonies to inaugurate their brave adventure. The women soldiers marched to St Isaac’s Cathedral in Petrograd, led by two army bands. The tremendous crowd included thousands of well wishers, garrison units, Cossacks, the press corps, and distinguished citizens, such as: Kerensky, Rodzianko, Kornilov, Polovtsoff, and others. The Battalion saluted the distinguished visitors as they marched up the Cathedral steps and marched into the overflowing church. Two archbishops and twelve priests conducted the ceremony; they dedicated the unit standard to Bochkareva. As was customary, the commander’s name, Bochkareva, was emblazoned on the gold and white standard<sup>109</sup>. During the prayers, the archbishops also sprinkled her with holy water three times. Afterwards she was presented with two icons from soldier delegates representing the First and Third Armies. General Kornilov, representing the entire Army, presented Bochkareva with a revolver and a saber with handles of gold. In addition to the various impromptu tributes, Kerensky ended the official ceremony by pinning Lieutenant epaulets on her uniform, making Bochkareva an officer.<sup>110</sup>



FIGURE 7: THE BLESSING OF THE “WOMEN’S BATTALION OF DEATH” IN FRONT OF ST. ISAAC’S CATHEDRAL

The next three days were spent in final preparation for departure to the front. Separating from garrison support, the battalion organized its own supply and mess section, and the soldiers were issued their remaining war equipment.<sup>111</sup> On 6 July, they marched out of their garrison area to the square of Kazan Cathedral for a final blessing. The ceremony was held outside in a light drizzle. With thousands there as witnesses, including the American Ambassador David Francis, the British Ambassador Sir George Buchanan, and many press correspondents, the women knelt and received their final blessing from the archbishop and the priests of the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>112</sup> After the blessing of the icons, Bochkareva kissed the church's Golden Cross.<sup>113</sup> While the battalion was somewhat protected in the square, the Bolsheviks were intent on stopping the women soldiers from going to the front. Even during the ceremony itself, with thousands of onlookers, Bolsheviks tried to create disorder, but were shouted down by the crowd.<sup>114</sup> At the end of the ceremony, the women paraded past and saluted Emmeline Pankhurst, who had supported the women's unit throughout their basic training<sup>115</sup>. She represented the international League for Equal Rights for Women; her presence attested to the fact that these Russian women were engaged in an event more universal and far-reaching than they could have imagined at the time.

Due to safety concerns for the unit, the Battalion had to be taken back to the barracks before attempting to clandestinely use the back way to the train station that evening.<sup>116</sup> Even with these precautions, Rheta Dorr, who accompanied the battalion to the front, recalled that the unit was confronted with a mob at the train station, noting that the women soldiers "were participating in what might be called the regiment's first hostile engagement." Even without a police escort to protect them, the women maintained their discipline and eventually entrained without anyone getting killed.<sup>117</sup> Similar to the way that many trains with soldiers departing for the front had gone in the past, this one also departed with mothers weeping for their children. William Shepherd, a United Press correspondent and witness to the event, pondered how the mothers dealt with the complexity of emotions in sending their daughters, not their sons, off to war.<sup>118</sup> And so these women soldiers, who six weeks earlier were unknown peasants, factory workers and even a few aristocratic daughters, headed off to war—truly extending the boundaries of gender equality more than any other event of that time.

### **The Women's Battalion of Death in Battle**

Members of the Battalion were harassed at each of the train station stops along the way to the front. While offloading after reaching the 9<sup>th</sup> Corps Headquarters area the following

morning, the women had to post sentries with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets, to protect themselves from the male Russian soldiers who did not comprehend their sincere intent. Heckling soldiers lined the roads as the women marched to temporary barracks to make final preparations prior to the offensive. The long wooden buildings that housed the women soldiers were exactly like the hundred others that stretched out as far as could be seen. The barracks were ventilated with windows and had two long wooden platforms running the lengths of the building to be used as beds. Inside, the women stored their 65-pound packs and outer gear, consisting of: weapons, ammunition belts, gas masks, tarpaulins, trench spades, food pails and their long overcoats, which were also used to cover the wooden planks when they slept. For the first several days, the hostility continued. It took a few tense encounters before the male soldiers were satisfied that the women were there not so much as a political tool, but "to fight and die for Russia." The women's outdoor drilling drew a lot of attention from the male soldiers. Even officers from various units came over each day to observe their competence, and some sent over their best drill instructors to assist. As relations between the male and female units seemed to warm, the Commander of the Tenth Army brought his entire staff over to observe their drill and shake many of the women's hands.<sup>119</sup> Despite the Russians' relatively open attitudes toward individual women soldiers infiltrating male units, this homogenous women's unit on the front line was truly a novelty and drew a great deal of skeptical attention.

Because both Rheta Dorr and Bessie Beattie lived with the women in the camp at the front before they were sent forward to the trenches, many details of both this experience and of the individual women were recorded. Several of the women-soldiers shared their impressions with the reporters, revealing that they felt the male officers initially viewed them with a "lofty indifference." The male soldiers, on the other hand, first assumed that their female counterparts would not be able to endure the real hardships of war. Their attitudes, however, soon changed after the camps' training march of 12 versts (8 miles).<sup>120</sup> The women reported that the men were completely exhausted after the march and required a great deal of care for their feet. The women, on the other hand, many of whom worked on farms, found it an easy task. When asked about the rigors of war, one member of the battalion responded that she viewed fighting as "less arduous if a little more dangerous than working in a harvest field or a factory."<sup>121</sup>

During this final preparation period in camp, the battalion was forced to stay indoors several days due to the frequent rains and subsequent mud. Even during those confined days, the girls studied their army manuals, conducted close order marching, and maintained their equipment.<sup>122</sup> Dorr and Beatty were amazed at how genuinely impatient they were to leave this

relatively safe place and go to battle.<sup>123</sup> Dorr, like many of the other observers, gave high praise to Maria Skridlova, who served as the deputy commander. Apparently well respected and liked by the women, she assuaged their eagerness for war by reminding them that the male leadership favored them since they were trusted to fight with only a fraction of the normal six-months training that most soldiers received.<sup>124</sup> Skridlova was a highly educated and refined patrician; she spoke several languages and was the daughter of a famous Russian admiral.<sup>125</sup> Despite the fact that these two leaders came from opposite ends of both the Russian social poles and personal aptitudes, the desperation of the war and their shared patriotic motivations linked them together as a good team. Without question, each brought critical strengths: Bochkareva brought her fiery vision, years of combat experience, and access to the political and military leadership; while Skridlova brought civility, an intellectual attitude, and the ability to communicate well with the other women.



FIGURE 8: THE OFFICERS OF THE WOMEN'S BATTALION OF DEATH WITH BOCHKAREVA ON BOTTOM LEFT AND SKRIDLOVA IN CENTER

After 10 days at the forward camp, the battalion received word to move forward. The women marched eagerly to their assigned trenchline. In mid-July 1917, Russia's first Women's Battalion of Death earned its place in history by coming out of their trenches along the Smorgon-Krevo front after a two-day artillery bombardment of the Germans.<sup>126</sup> They were assigned to the 525<sup>th</sup> Kuriag-Daryinski Regiment, Tenth Army. Internally, Bochkareva

organized for battle by spreading out the officers among her soldiers along their section of trenchline to maintain command and control. According to Bochkareva, Skridlova became too ill to fight the day before. Consequently, Lieutenant Filippov served as her adjutant during the battle. (This detail conflicts with other reports after the battle that say Skridlova fought bravely, was injured, and even received the Cross of St. George.<sup>127</sup>) Bochkareva records that the whole Corps was supposed to “go over the top” at 3 A.M., but due to the uncertainty of the various soldiers’ committee throughout the Corps, the advance was repeatedly delayed. Her description of how the battle stalled revealed how devastating Kerensky’s new “soldiers’ rights” program had affected Russian military efforts. She recalled, “The sun crept out in the east, only to cast its rays on the extraordinary spectacle of an entire corps debating their Commander’s order to advance.”<sup>128</sup> In a final effort to keep the front from deteriorating into total impotence, Lieutenant Colonel Ivanov brought 75 officers and 300 soldiers to join forces with Bochkareva’s unit. He believed that once they went into battle, the remaining soldiers would decide to reinforce their efforts. Although he was senior to Bochkareva, Ivanov declined command of the unit, now swollen to a thousand soldiers.

Prior to advancing over the top, they reorganized, putting at least two men between every woman soldier. In the late afternoon, they moved into No Man’s Land amidst the flurry of bullets. Masses of the loitering soldiers then began to join the singular regiment, until nearly the entire Russian corps poured out onto the battlefield. Bochkareva recalled how they overwhelmed the first and second German trenchlines. At one point, her regiment alone had captured two thousand prisoners. Orders came for them to continue through the night to the third line of trenches and wait for the Ninth Corps to back them up at 3 A.M. Scouting parties were then sent into the woods to determine the German’s strength. At first light of the morning, when the enemy had the advantage of seeing their silhouettes, the fighting became so ferocious that many of the Russian soldiers retreated and ran to the rear. Bochkareva reported that none of her women ran. By early morning, she estimated that at least 50 of the women soldiers were already dead or wounded.

Unfortunately, as Ninth Corps reinforcements continued to debate in the rear whether they were going to fight or not, the exposed corps found themselves in a precarious situation, lacking sufficient forces to push forward. While her regiment was pinned down, Bochkareva dodged bullets and ran from position to position, checking on soldiers. At one point she came across a male and female soldier making love on the battlefield. Overcome by the unit’s desperate situation of almost certain annihilation, their unimaginable conduct sent her into a rage. She killed her soldier on the spot with a bayonet. The male soldier ran away before she could deal

with him. With no prospect for the timely conclusion of the debate, the Ninth Corps Commander ordered the unit to save themselves by retreating. Then, they began the difficult and perilous task of extricating themselves back over No Man's Land without being shot. After several hours, the unit had made impressive progress toward the rear. But was hit by a tremendous artillery barrage, signaling a German counter-offensive. Bochkareva was knocked unconscious and subsequently carried back to the Russian lines by her adjutant, Lieutenant Filippov. In the end, the offensive was aborted and the Germans reoccupied all the ground that had previously been taken.<sup>129</sup>

Contemporary sources offered mixed reviews on how well the Women's Battalion of Death acquitted itself.<sup>130</sup> Dorr and Beatty, who stayed with the unit prior to the battle, both reported positively. Other sources reported the casualties after the two-day battle as 6 killed, 21 severely wounded, and dozens more wounded and in base hospitals. Of the approximate 250 women who entered the battle, reports claimed that only 50 made it back to the Russian trenchline in fighting condition. They also reported that Skridlova was badly wounded around the head, shoulders and knees, but took command of the remnant of women after the battle, since Bochkareva suffered from serious shell shock and was eventually sent back to a hospital in Petrograd. Beatty reported that ten of the women (including Skridlova) were decorated for bravery in action with the Order of St George, with twenty others also receiving medals.<sup>131</sup>

Without question, the least favorable account of the women's battle performance was found in Florence Farmborough's diary account, [With the Armies of the Tsar: A Nurse at the Russian Front 1914-18](#). She recorded in her diary on Sunday, 13 August (1917), that they had received more information about the Women's Death Battalion, which confirmed that Bochkareva's 250 volunteers did go into the attack, yet claimed that a few did not "go over the top." Her entry records that "some remained in the trenches, fainting and hysterical; others ran or crawled back to the rear." Her version also claimed that Bochkareva was "wrathful and broken hearted" to learn that "women were quite unfit to be soldiers."<sup>132</sup> While there is a chance that some of the women may have refused to charge out of the trench, none of the other accounts corroborate this second-hand account. It is more likely that her diary account reflects the author's bias. Even further, it is highly unlikely that Bochkareva would have maligned her soldiers' performance when their success had been so important to her credibility. Her soldiers demonstrated courage and risked death by going into the battle as a single regiment, hoping that the rest of the corps would follow their example. Furthermore, correspondents and writers who closely followed this first women's unit in combat reported neither Bochkareva's initial disillusionment in her soldiers' performance nor any reports of their cowardice.<sup>133</sup>

A wholly reliable assessment on how well the women performed in combat is difficult to make 86 years after the fact. Certainly there are many more factors than simply the outcome of the battle that should be considered in the assessment. Indeed, it is important to consider that the various press reports of the day were reporting a “phenomenon.” Perhaps they were written with a slant toward sensationalism. Some of these writers, especially the ones who lived with the women at the front just before their combat experience, may have developed personal bonds of loyalty and admiration and thus may have been inclined to report as positively as possible. Many others covering the event may also have had personal agenda regarding the way they viewed and reported the experience. Mrs. Pankhurst, for example, the champion of women’s causes, sent a proud telegram to the editor of the *Britannia*, reporting, “First Women’s Battalion number 250 took place of retreating troops. In counter-attack made one hundred prisoners, including two officers. Only five weeks training. Their leader wounded. Have earned undying fame, morale effect great. More women soldiers training, also marines.”<sup>134</sup> Even though the battle itself produced few signs of victory other than some captured prisoners and ammunition, nearly every press report gave the women soldiers good marks. According to the Russian newspaper, cited by Dorr, *Novoe Vremya*:

The women’s battalion made a counter-attack, replacing deserters who ran away. The battalion captured almost a hundred prisoners including two officers. Botchkareva and Skridlova are wounded, the latter receiving contusions and shock from the explosion of a big shell. The battalion suffered some losses, but has won historic fame for the name of women. The best soldiers looked with consideration and esteem on their new fighting comrades, but the deserters were not touched by their example, and in this respect the aim was not reached. We must take care of these dear forces, and not give too much consideration to new formations of the kind.”<sup>135</sup>

Perhaps this report had it about right. Women had indeed proved that they could ably fight as combatants with their male counterparts. But even with this tactical victory, they failed to achieve the strategic goal of the government, which was to arouse the conscience of the Russian men to rally in defense of their homeland. Dorr took great exception with the comment at the end of the article that implied women’s units should be thanked and then disbanded since their service would never be able to affect men’s behavior. She felt that this was precisely the time that the press and the government needed to reinforce the tragedy that women were going to continue to fight and die for this worthy cause until such a necessity ceased to exist.<sup>136</sup>

This case study of a women’s combatant unit offers valuable and neglected historical lessons. Without question, certain women in certain situations can fight just as well as men. In

this particular case, there were many factors affecting their performance. These young women, who had significantly less training time than the male units (six weeks versus six months), seemed to compensate for the lack of training through their strong motivation. These women, for the most part, seemed to believe in the value of their cause, to the point of willingly sacrificing their lives. Interviewed after the battle, the women soldiers said that they had “all expected to die.” While they said their prayers, thought sadly about the loved ones they would miss from home, their commitment to the cause overcame the fear and they willingly followed their leader Bochkareva, out onto the battlefield.<sup>137</sup> Despite their lack of training, another factor that contributed to their success in fighting was their general fitness—their psychological and physical ability to endure harsh conditions, which many had gained prior to becoming soldiers.

Bochkareva compensated for their lack of tactical training by placing more experienced soldiers between the newly recruited women soldiers, allowing the women to observe and mimic successful fighting techniques from those around them. On the basis of limited evidence, the significance of the Battalion’s success suggests the overriding importance of a soldier’s inner-motivation over the relationship of direct physical strength comparisons between men and women. Clearly most of the women were weaker than most of the men, yet the women entered a battle which presented terrible odds for survival, while the less motivated men discussed and debated whether they would fight or not. While the ad hoc regiment formed of men and women from Bochkareva’s and Ivonov’s battalions did influence their own corps to fight, the entire 9<sup>th</sup> Corps was never persuaded to reinforce their dying comrades, even if 250 of them were women. Herein lies the difficulty of fairly judging how women’s units, or even large numbers of women in mixed units, can fight. This case study occurred in the midst of a national revolution and at the height of the Russian army’s dysfunctionality. We can only speculate what the outcome would have been if discipline had been maintained in all the fighting units. In my judgment as an Army officer with 20 years experience, it seems apparent that these women had sufficient physical strength and tactical know-how to fight. They were highly motivated to have continued to fight bravely and successfully, especially if given proper reinforcements. Like all soldiers, their lack of garrison training would have been quickly compensated for through their newly gained combat experience.

This forecast for potential continued successes does not overlook the unit’s flaws. Bochkareva having bayoneted one of her own soldiers on the battlefield who was making love raises another sensitive objection to forming women’s combat units. Not every citizen was suited to be a soldier, and likewise, not every soldier was suited for combat. Throughout the press reports released about the Women’s Battalion of Death, the issue of appropriate



recruitment seems to suggest an area of weakness. The fact that Bochkareva gained 1500 of her initial 2000 volunteers the first night of her appeal for women to join indicates that she might have gotten many ill-suited women who were seduced by either the romantic idea of “saving Holy Russia” without realistically considering the hardships of war, or may have sought this opportunity as a way to be fed and to meet men. As previously mentioned, there was minimal physical screening, yet it was apparent that no time was given to try and discern if the recruits were truly combat material or even if they were morally disciplined enough to refrain from inappropriate sexual behavior during training. Perhaps many of those who were not psychologically ready for the strict discipline and hardship of combat left the unit the day that the Bolshevik agitator convinced approximately 1600 of the women to refuse to submit to Bochkareva’s traditional exercise of army discipline. As evidenced by the one woman who was summarily executed on the battlefield by Bochkareva, however, apparently all of these types of people had not all been rooted out. Beatty offers an insightful observation when she was sharing camp with the women just prior to the fight. When asking one of the soldiers if she minded her hair being cut so short, the soldier answered for the battalion by saying, “Soldiers and women were for them things apart.” Beatty goes on to explain that when they cut off their curls and long hair and pledged themselves to fight and die for Russia, that they had necessarily put aside their femininity.<sup>138</sup> This concept of successful soldiering, which required the women to step out of their own traditional gender roles, was addressed by many of the observers. Their common theme – successful women fighters could no longer think of themselves as women, but only as soldiers.

William Shepherd reported on an insightful conversation with a 17 year-old girl who had initially joined the Women’s Battalion of Death. She held that she had left the battalion because there were “too many bad girls in our company.” When asked how morals had anything to do with fighting ability, she advised him that this was a crucial aspect, and that you could never trust one of those “bad girls” while on the firing line. The girl went on to explain that she had previously fought in a male regiment and that she was willing to go back to fight for Russia, but not with some of the girls in Bochkareva’s unit. It is unknown whether this girl left the battalion before or after the huge purging, but she went on to state her belief that sex in units “not only ruins girl soldiers, but the men soldiers, too.” After talking with many of the women who had fought with the Battalion of Death and with the women in the newly forming women’s regiments, Shepherd agreed with the consensus that successful women’s units required female soldiers loose their ties to gender affiliation and retain only the identity of a patriotic human being.<sup>139</sup> Even today, this insight of enforcing proper screening procedures to ensure that women

combatants maintain a single-minded focus on the mission at hand will be a crucial component toward integrating men and women on the battlefield. To the greatest extent possible, creating an environment where men and women soldiers develop a mutual respect for each other's professional capabilities and contributions will be an important factor toward developing any future integrated combat forces.

Finally, the battle also revealed that women's ability to successfully participate in combat could be enabled through technological development. Female soldiers armed with magazine rifles, could be just as effective at killing their enemies at some distance as male soldiers.<sup>140</sup> The introduction of more lethal weapons onto the battlefield begins to "level the playing field" in regard to the physical differences between men and women. When interviewing Bochkareva in the hospital after the battle, Shepherd made the connection that the women could fight like the men because of the improved rifles and machine guns that were available to them in twentieth-century combat. If they had fought hand-to-hand, like Joan of Arc's men of the fifteenth-century, even Bochkareva's relative strength and size would not have been adequate.<sup>141</sup> The take-away lesson for today's militaries is important: As the continued introduction of technology on the modern battlefield increases, soldiers' proximity to their enemy decreases. Accordingly, the level of physical strength required for combat declines. Less than 20 years later, relatively few infantrymen in WWII would ever see their enemy. With this trend of reduced physical strength required for infantry, armor, and artillery soldiers, sailors or aviators, the inability of women to participate in combat becomes less of an issue over physical limitations, and focuses more on cultural integration. There is abundant evidence from the thousands of Russian women who fought in combat in WWI, and even more so from the women who fought in WWII, that they had the aptitude for the various critical combat skills, ranging from sighting a weapon to flying an aircraft.<sup>142</sup> More comprehensive study should consider all implications of further incorporation of women into combat roles. Such studies should consider the cultural adaptations and organizational changes that would be necessary to integrate women combatants. By establishing a standard for all infantry, armor, and artillery tasks, that all participants must achieve, the issue of women's physical inequalities with men is virtually moot.

### **Bochkareva in Russia after the Battle**

The Battle of Smorgon marked Bochkareva's zenith as a Russian soldier. From this point forward, she struggled, almost in vain, to persuade others to support her cause. After a month of recovering from shell shock in a Petrograd hospital, Kerensky asked her to inspect the women's regiment in Moscow before rejoining her unit at the front. The open hostility that she

encountered from the other women's units drastically contrasted with the reception she received soon thereafter when reunited with her own battalion at the front.<sup>143</sup> According to the few brief accounts that mention the hostility between the two camps of women, the almost tender bonds that Bochkareva built with her own "girls" was not shared by others because they misunderstand her methods and motives. They probably did not share her single-minded view of protecting Russia from the invaders and were most likely swayed by conflicting values arising from the revolution. Bochkareva worked to prevent her soldiers from being politicized.

Unknown to Bochkareva at the time, she had less than three years to pursue her goal of saving Russia prior to her execution. Immediately after returning to the front and resuming command of her remaining 200-soldier battalion, she was recalled to Petrograd by General Kornilov, the Commander-in Chief, and subsequently became involved in the rift between Kerensky and the Kornilov. The conditions at the front had disintegrated to the point that Russian soldiers were randomly mobbing and killing their officers, and a virtual truce had been established between the German and Russian soldiers. Kornilov wanted to reinstate discipline in the army and avert collapse of the eastern front, but Kerensky refused to change his position. This standoff quickly led to Kornilov's defiance and his attempt to take control of the government with his troops. Kornilov was then banned as an enemy of the State, and Kerensky's position with the soldiers and workers was bolstered after saving them from the "counter-revolutionists."<sup>144</sup> Unfortunately for Bochkareva, her personal association with Kornilov and her shared belief that discipline in the military was absolutely essential to achieve victory over Germany cast her as a counter-revolutionary and a supporter of the Whites once the civil war began.

During Bochkareva's final months at the front with her unit, she refused to submit to the newly established norm of non-aggression against the Germans. Despite the fact that Red Guards (the Bolshevik militia) now openly walked the streets of Petrograd and that the Russian soldiers across the entire front were either fraternizing with the enemy or leaving the front lines in great numbers, Bochkareva refused to compromise. At one point, she personally shot a German soldier who was walking in front of her unit's position. The male Russian soldiers were so outraged at her militant behavior that they turned and fired a machine gun down into the women's trenchline. The women's unit escaped to a reserve billets area until the anger died down. Initially, the senior officers told Bochkareva that she would have to disband her battalion, but somehow she contacted Kerensky and got his permission for the unit to return to a more active part of the front. Upon her return, she was promoted to Captain by General Valuyev, Commander of the Tenth Army. She then proceeded to put her unit "on regular war footing" at

the front. Their willingness to fire at the enemy greatly upset the Germans. Bochkareva, however, temporarily convinced the ruling Russian soldiers' committees that her unit had the right to fight, even if the men refused. The men agreed to this arrangement until her unit's actions prompted a retaliatory artillery barrage from the Germans, which killed several of her own soldiers as well as many 'noncombatant soldiers.'<sup>145</sup> The male soldiers were so outraged in their belief that Bochkareva was trying to drag out the war that they began to battle the women's unit. During the midst of the combat, word was received that the Bolsheviks had overthrown Kerensky in Petrograd and had taken control of the government. This news only fueled their fervor to kill the women soldiers. Running after them, they caught and lynched 20 of the girls and crushed to death four male instructors who tried to block their attack, allowing the rest of the battalion to escape. This marked the end of the Women's Battalion of Death. With Red Guards everywhere, they were forced to disband, donning women's clothing and infiltrating by train to various towns. Recalling how the battalion disbanded, Bochkareva reflected on the "failure of her unit:"

The battalion had struggled gallantly to stem the tide of destruction and ignorance. But the tide was too mighty. It had swamped all that was good and noble in Russia. Russia herself seemed wrecked forever in that maelstrom of unbridled passions. One did not want to live. There remained only the honor and satisfaction of going down with all that had been upright in the country. Everything seemed upside down. There was no friendship only hatred. The unselfishness of the days when Tsarism was overthrown, now, after the fall of Kerensky, had given way to a wave of greed and revenge. Every soldier, every peasant, every workman, saw red. They all hunted phantom bourgeois, bloodsuckers, exploiters. When freedom was first born there was universal brotherhood and joy. Now intolerance and petty covetousness reigned supreme.

She went on to describe how she kissed each of the departing girls farewell, and in searching her soul, found "little to regret."

I had done my duty to my country. Perhaps it was too rash for me to imagine this handful of women could save the army from disruption. And yet, I was not alone in my expectation. There was a time when Rodzianko believed likewise, and Brusilov and Kerensky thought that self-sacrificing women would shame the men. But the men knew no shame.<sup>146</sup>

From a strategic view, the purpose of the battalion failed. This battalion, along with the other untested women's battalions forming throughout Russia, had, in fact, failed to convince the men that they should continue to fight against Germany. While the women's units valiantly appealed to Russians to keep fighting, perhaps a few "radical women patriots" could never

overcome the deep-seated war weariness of the country, compounded by their hopes of the coming revolution. But from a tactical perspective, Bochkareva's unit performance offered a powerful demonstration that women could indeed fight in combat. Bessie Beatty observed: "Women can fight. Women have the courage, the endurance, even the strength for fighting. Vera (Bochkareva) has demonstrated that, and if necessary all the other women of the world can demonstrate it."<sup>147</sup>

### **Bochkareva: The Rest of the Story**

After the Battalion disbanded one-by-one, Bochkareva was the last to leave the front. Rather than being able to return to her parents' home as she had hoped, she was identified and detained at the Petrograd train station by Red Guards, and taken to the Smolny Institute (Bolshevik headquarters). Eventually she was called in to speak with Lenin and Trotsky, the new leaders of Russia, who offered her the opportunity to join their cause. She stood her ground, however, and accused them of selling out the country by withdrawing troops from the front without first negotiating a peace agreement. Unlike most of the peasantry population, Bochkareva was not fooled into thinking that the Germans would stop taking ground if Russia unilaterally withdrew troops to enjoy their new "freedoms." She was released and allowed to go free, but regrettably for her, she was never given back her treasured saber and pistol that were confiscated during her detention.

After visiting her family for a short time, she was recalled to Petrograd and given instructions to arrange for a clandestine meeting with General Kornilov, deep inside the White lines. She subsequently disguised herself as a Sister of Mercy and eventually made her way to Kornilov's headquarters. They agreed that she should try to go to America to convince the Allies to assist in rescuing Russia— this time from the Bolsheviks. It was on her return trip to Petrograd, however, that she was captured by the Reds and nearly executed. By some incredible luck, a sympathetic Red officer intervened and arranged for her to be transported back to Moscow to receive a full hearing. After two weeks of confinement in horrible conditions she was released. Before making her way to Vladivostok to find passage to America, she tried to find some of her women soldiers who had become invalids in the battle. Again, as luck would have it, she found 30 of the remaining invalids who were just being evicted from their shelter. Through some amazing efforts, she then obtained some money and took these women to her parents' town – providing the money for their care while she traveled to the United States.<sup>148</sup>

Traveling as a civilian, she arrived in Vladivostok in April 1918. Through the assistance of the British consulate she was spirited aboard the American transport, *Sheridan* for passage to

America. Coincidentally, she discovered that her former aide, Lieutenant Leonid Flippov was also aboard the ship, fleeing from the Reds. Fortunately for Bochkareva, he quickly agreed to serve as her aide while on her mission to the United States.<sup>149</sup> Florence Farmborough, a passenger on the *Sheridan*, wrote in her diary: "By a strange working of fate, one of the persons I have seen on board is Yasha Bachkarova, erstwhile leader of the Women's Death Battalion. She has eluded the spy-net of the Red Guards and is making good for her escape to the United States."<sup>150</sup>

While in the United States, Bochkareva not only received an office call with President Woodrow Wilson during his July 10<sup>th</sup> deliberations over continued American military aid to the democratic government of North Russia, but she was also received as a guest by former President, Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>151</sup> President Roosevelt was so taken by her "remarkable character abounding in natural wisdom and determination," that he gave her \$1,000 gift from his Nobel Prize money.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, during the summer of 1918, Bochkareva, at the prompting of many leading feminists, agreed to dictate her life story for publication to the Russian-speaking author, Isaac Don Levine. By the end of the summer, *Yashka: My Life as Peasant, Exile and Soldier* was complete. Lieutenant Flippov conducted all the negotiations for the book, magazine and syndicated rights. Also, Flippov contracted for the serialization of *Yashka* in Theodore Roosevelt's periodical, the *Metropolitan Magazine*.<sup>153</sup> While in America, Bochkareva received tremendous notoriety, and delivered a series of lectures across the country in attempts to solicit help for her country. She then sailed for England and met with the War Office before finally accompanying a British contingent to Archangel in August 1918.<sup>154</sup>

Bochkareva remained in Archangel for a year, having no desire to go to Soviet Russia. After rejecting the Governor-General's offer to form a volunteer unit, she returned to Tomsk in July 1919. Once home, she reported to Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, the leader of the White Russian forces in Sebia, to receive permission to retire with a pension.<sup>155</sup> He convinced her that her services were needed and assigned her to organize a medical unit of 30 men and 170 women. The unit was subsequently provided an apartment for the headquarters and barracks for the soldiers in Novonikilaevsk. On leave visiting her family in Tomsk, however, she was arrested on 24 December 1919, placed in jail, and later taken to Krasnoyarsk.<sup>156</sup>

According to interrogation documents the investigators believed she was working for the White Army, as evidenced by the fact that she commanded the medical unit for Kolchak. Furthermore, her memoirs (already published) clearly revealed her participation and support for General Kornilov. Subsequently, the interrogators did not believe that Bochkareva had changed

her convictions, though she claimed differently, in supporting the White Government. While it appears from the records that initially there was an order to repeal her death sentence and send her to Moscow for further inquires, Lenin later reversed the decision. The Soviets executed First Lieutenant Bochkareva by firing squad on 16 May 1920. She was 31 years of age.<sup>157</sup>

### **The Other Women's Units**

After Bochkareva's Women's Battalion of Death was formed, other women's regiments were formed all over Russia. Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917, the largest women's regiment was forming in Moscow, with approximately 2,000 women. The Provisional Government's intent was to raise women's participation in various units to a strength of approximately ten to twenty thousand women, and subsequently "to distribute these regiments over the various front lines to inspire and stimulate the disorganized army." In August 1917, the press reported that 1,500 women in one of the two Petrograd Women's Regiments departed their garrison at the Engineer Palace to begin their final phase of combat preparation before going to the front.<sup>158</sup> With the luxury of having more time to train, organize and equip, these later women's regiments were able to implement many improvements over Bochkareva's unit. For example, most of the women officers were given the opportunity to attend the regular officer's training course prior to taking command of their soldiers. In addition, organizations such as Moscow's "Society of Russian Women to Help the Country" were established to formalize recruitment and provide the necessarily intense screening that would ensure physical aptitude for combat and deter morally corrupted women from joining the units, thereby averting subsequent discipline problems.<sup>159</sup> Other recruiting bureaus were also formed in Petrograd and Kiev. According to the New York Times (August 1917) the Provisional Government issued arms and complete uniforms to equip these new units and was evaluating a more suitable uniform design for women fighters. The government also appointed senior male officers as commanders of these units and used men to train them.<sup>160</sup> In addition to these ground combat units being formed, there is sporadic evidence that a Naval Women's Battalion of Death may have also been formed.<sup>161</sup>



FIGURE 9: MADAME SKVORTZOVA, COMMANDER OF THE NAVAL WOMEN'S BATTALION OF DEATH

One of the big differences between Bochkareva's unit and the newly formed battalions was the emphasis in discerning and weeding out any women that lacked morality. William

Shepherd, the United Press correspondent who followed the women's units, interviewed women in the Petrograd Regiment to better understand their perspective on this subject. They claimed that Bochkareva's mistake when she organized her unit was that she took "all comers" who looked strong and healthy and failed to dismiss those who were discovered participating in immoral activities. The new units screened women for morality issues and after admittance would "watch them very closely and study their characters." The new women's regiments felt strongly that "even one bad girl" would be an "evil influence," and would be dismissed.<sup>162</sup> Corroborated by several sources, there was a great deal of animosity between the women who stayed with Bochkareva's battalion (250), and those who formed other units and were organized under a different model.<sup>163</sup>

Perhaps the most important improvement in the newly formed women's units was the revised organizational structure. Miss Framenko, a university student and the Chairwoman of the "Women's Military League" in Petrograd explained how the new units would be organized:

"The organization of the battalion will be similar to that of the male fighting forces. It will have a regular staff, its own transport and medical service, its own signal corps and a machine gun company with four guns...to the working of which our girls take readily. Finally there will be an expert scouting detachment of 26 Cossack-girls, magnificent riders since childhood, all of whose fathers or husbands are all at the front."<sup>164</sup>

This organizational improvement, plus the additional formalized training of the new women's units would, no doubt, have drastically improved their lethality on the battlefield. From the above description, these new units were not merely infantry units, they were really forming a fairly sophisticated combined arms team. Clearly, the new women's units, organized and trained to address the battlefield operating systems would have been a combat multiplier over the previous, less complex, homogenous infantry organization, like the one that Bochkareva commanded.

The chief instructor for the Petrograd regiment, Captain Loskoff, offered the female recruits, most of who knew nothing of soldiering prior to enlisting, the highest praise possible. "I have drilled hundreds of men soldiers, but I do not hesitate to declare that these women learn with double speed. This is not true only of the educated girls, but also of the peasant girls, some of whom are entirely illiterate. 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."<sup>165</sup> From a historic perspective, it is unfortunate that these newly formed women's units would never be tested in battle so that their recruitment, training, and organizational improvements could have



been measured. As a result of the Second Revolution in November 1917, none of these women's regiments saw combat.

Looking back on the history of these women's combat units, it is worth noting that Bochkareva, the founder of the movement, failed to mention the other women's units in her memoirs, with one exception. In August 1917, after recovering from the Battle of Smorgon, she visited the Women's Battalion in Moscow. She characterized the women soldiers' appearance as sleazy and having nonchalant bearing. Apparently when she told them that they were a "disgrace to the army!" she caused such a violent uproar that she was nearly killed by a mob of 1,000 angry men.<sup>166</sup> Such a report highlights the apparent hostility that was aroused between the personalities of the original Women's Battalion and the subsequently formed units. Oran Wightman, an American physician working in Russia in 1917, records in his diary on 26 August 1917, that he received word from Bochkareva. She asked him if he would be careful to distinguish between her "Battalion of Death" and the other women's units in his correspondence.<sup>167</sup> It was one of these newer units, in fact, that gained notoriety for its role in defending the Kerensky government against the Bolshevik take over.<sup>168</sup>

#### **The Last Stand: The Winter Palace**

A point of distinction is important when closing out the report of the various women's battalions that formed during the Provisional Government period. Since there were only two combatant encounters that the various women's units actually participated in, discerning who participated in the defense of the Winter Palace is significant.<sup>169</sup>



FIGURE 10: SOLDIERS FROM THE WOMEN'S PETROGRAD REGIMENT GUARDING THE WINTER PALACE

Some press reports of the day erroneously assumed that the women's unit that guarded the Winter Palace on the last days under Kerensky regime was Bochkareva's Battalion of Death. This was not the case. The confusion in the reports resulted from people associating every major event in which a women's unit participated as being credited to the only unit with which they were familiar— the most widely known unit, Bochkareva's Death Battalion. Even in Bochkareva's own memoirs she reports that her unit was on the front line being attacked by the male Russian soldiers at the time of Kerensky's overthrow.<sup>170</sup> Female soldiers from the Women's Petrograd Regiment performed this historic mission. Major General Sir Alfred Knox, the British military attaché in Petrograd, provides the most complete description of the sequence of events leading up to and following the Bolsheviks overrunning the Winter Palace in his diary, With the Russian Army 1915-1917. Two days prior to the takeover, on 6 November 1917, he offers insight into the unit's readiness by stating: "About 1,000 women marched past the Embassy this morning on their way to be inspected by Kerensky on the Palace Square. They made the best show of any soldiers I have seen since the Revolution, but it gave me a lump in the throat to see them, and the utter swine of "men" soldiers jeering at them"<sup>171</sup> By 8 November, Knox noted that nearly all the Government troops had disappeared from Petrograd. Even Kerensky, prior to dawn, had borrowed a car from the Americans and escaped to Pskov. The normal defense force of about 2,000 soldiers, six guns and an armored car had dwindled to some of the ensigns from the Engineering School and a company of 140 women from the Women's Petrograd Regiment.<sup>172</sup>

According to Knox, when the Bolsheviks arrived to oust Kerensky's regime, the few defenders were nearly powerless to stop the onslaught. Three of the women soldiers were stripped and thrown into the Neva River, and that the remaining 137 were taken to the Pavlovski barracks, where they "were searched for bombs in an unnecessary manner." He also noted that of all the troops guarding the Winter Palace, the Bolsheviks later disclosed that, "the company of women offered the most serious resistance." Knox himself believed the women's "real patriotism formed the brightest spot in the general apathy since the Revolution."<sup>173</sup>

In the defense of the Winter Palace, it would be difficult to draw many lessons on the use of women in combat, except to say that these women demonstrated tremendous loyalty and personal courage in the face of overwhelming odds. When nearly all the men's units, with the exception of a few officers, had fled their posts, the women remained. Whether this example offers insight into a gender characteristic, it is hard to determine— but it does demonstrate the importance of having soldiers who have internalized the necessity of their cause. Obviously, the

female gender does not solely possess the qualities of loyalty, courage, and discipline, but it is evident from this unit's brave defense of the Winter Palace, that women soldiers were capable of bringing those qualities to a unit.

## CONCLUSION

In France, England and Germany, women have undoubtedly done a great deal to help wage war. But the Russians were the first women to take an active part in the fighting, to go into the battlefield in organized body, side by side with the men. And the fearless way in which they faced death, with unparalleled courage and determination, seemed almost incredible to those who do not know the Russian woman.<sup>174</sup>

—Michael Posner

The experience of Russian women soldiers of WWI causes the modern student of history and warfare to pause and consider the epochal qualities and desperate conditions that existed, especially in view of the fact that Russia created several women's voluntary combat units. With WWI being the first war where, globally, women were lawfully permitted to serve in the uniformed armed forces; the fact that Russia created women's combatant units was almost beyond comprehension for Western observers of the day. Even today, in the Twenty-First Century, where Western women have breached many traditionally male boundary lines, such as firefighters, construction workers, much of the armed forces, police chiefs, business executives, and the like; the United States still has not opened up the military career fields, which involve direct combat, to women.<sup>175</sup> What happened in Russia during WWI is truly astounding by even current Western standards.

One of the important, and perhaps immediately practical, benefits that can be derived from examining these women combatants relates to the question of integration issues with men, and their demonstrated capabilities during actual combat. Women have been integrated, to some degree, into the combat arms of various countries throughout the past century, but there is precious little written about their experience as combatants.<sup>176</sup> Maria Bochkareva's memoirs, which are rich in detail, and numerous related primary source materials, however, provide valuable lessons into both of these areas. As far as integration is concerned, the Russian women's units discovered early, the importance of selecting women who were not only physically fit, but who were psychologically focused on the military mission, versus accepting women who were principally concerned about gaining increased interaction with men. When comparing Bochkareva's unit with the follow-on women's units, the evidence suggests these later units avoided many of the disciplinary problems by being more selective in their

recruitment. Cultural considerations were also important in the integration process. The Russian culture of that day differed greatly from the current U.S. culture. In as far as gender status was concerned, most U.S. citizens of today, both male and female, generally view women as being equally valued, but would tend to believe that vigorously physical work and direct killing in combat is principally a male responsibility. Unlike the Russians of the early 1900's, who viewed many of their women as sturdy and well-suited for hard physical labor, the American military establishment would have a tougher time in transforming mental expectations of women's roles in the military. Generally, Western culture has been unaccustomed to viewing women as combatants—as killers versus creators<sup>177</sup>. Once Bochkareva's women were given the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities, however, many peoples' views were converted. Rheta Dorr, who witnessed much of the development of the "Women's Battalion of Death" summed up the feeling of many who observed the unit and were changed by what they saw.

These women have overthrown every convention and forgotten everything women have been taught. These did their job in dead earnest, and there was no nonsense about them. It had never occurred to me before that women ought to go to war, but I am convinced now that in any country under such conditions women ought to step into the breach, guns in hand.<sup>178</sup>

Some of these cultural and attitudinal changes will, no doubt, occur more quickly only after U.S. women have demonstrated through circumstances that have not yet arisen, that they, too, are capable of performing this previously restricted role.

While this paper does not attempt to comment on every integration issue that will have to be addressed if the U.S. combat arms branches are opened to women, it is helpful to see how many of the same issues that revolve around the current debate were previously addressed. The issue of gender-bias is an example of an integration issue that cannot be addressed when looking at a WWI Russian women's case study. The two nations' mindset and traditional view of women are too different to draw viable conclusions. An important integration issue that can be extracted, however, was the privacy and respect issue. Most of Bochkareva's women encountered these problems when they first arrived in a mixed training area at the front. The bulk of these problems, however, were eliminated after the women soldiers confronted the men and stood up to them. After this initial "storming" period, a level of respect was mutually developed and most privacy issues were accommodated. In addition to some physical separation adjustments, these women at the front conceded that both the men and the women eventually made expectation adjustments: "Of course one lost foolish mock modesty when in camp."<sup>179</sup> Consequently, the Russian women's experience indicates that with minimal structural

reconfiguration, commanders could expect some initial hostility, but that respect-levels and norms would eventually develop, and new arrangements would become commonplace.

Beyond gaining insight into integration issues, the case study on Bochkareva's unit also provides a valuable lesson of how well women could perform under the terrible conditions and stress of combat. In the Battle of Smorgon, Bochkareva's girls demonstrated that women could be effective fighters, even in the worst of battlefield situations. With only six weeks to recruit, organize, and train raw recruits, Bochkareva and her cadre took the women to the front for combat. Unlike the men assigned in their Corps, these untested women, and one additional male battalion, were the only ones willing to come out of the trenches to attack the Germans. What courage these women demonstrated by running out into No Man's Land, into a hail of bullets, in faith that their efforts would not entirely be in vain. They progressed through three lines of German trenches, capturing prisoners, before their thinning numbers caused them to wait for the reinforcing corps to follow.<sup>180</sup> In the intensity of combat, when the defense by the Germans was so violent and effective that hundreds of Russian soldiers retreated to the rear, all the women among the group kept going forward until Bochkareva's troops were eventually called to retreat back to the Russian lines.<sup>181</sup> While none of the ground that they had temporarily won would be taken, the women proved to the world that they were brave and effective combatants. Many of them were decorated for valor, and ten received the coveted Cross of St George. Bessie Beatty reported how the women's superior performance on the battlefield quieted the widespread anger of much of the Russian population over sending women into combat. She concluded by saying, "They fought like men. They were brave. There was nothing left to say."<sup>182</sup> The significance of this episode of women in combat is particularly important and should not be overlooked in the current ongoing dialogue of determining whether the U.S. military should offer women the opportunity to serve as combatants. As weapons technology increases, and the requirement of combatants to possess physically overpowering strength decreases, the question regarding the role of women in combat will continue to be raised. With Bochkareva's unit as a backdrop, the question is no longer, "whether women can fight?" The appropriate question that must be wrestled with is, "should women fight?" Not surprisingly, this is the same conclusion that the observers came up with in 1917.<sup>183</sup>

The results will never be known, but it would have been interesting to have been able to compare the performance of the "Women's Death Battalion" to the women's regiments that formed just after them. One can only speculate that their performance would have been even better. These subsequent units had the opportunity to improve recruitment, training and organizational structure. As discussed earlier, these later units had learned the valuable lesson

of selecting women who focused purely on fighting, and carefully screened out the women who were interested in sexual interaction with the men.<sup>184</sup> Additionally, the soldiers' training was more methodical. The newer units provided the women the same amount of training time that the men recruits normally received, and also provided the women officers the opportunity to attend the normal officer training courses. Finally, their organizational structure was more sophisticated. They had assigned functional roles to various platoons, such as transportation, signal and supply. This specialization training and unit structure would, no doubt, have made the unit more efficient. While training and organization are important, and can even be viewed as combat multipliers, the inner motivation and courage under fire results from the quality of the people within the unit and the leadership that is offered to them. Perhaps it was these intangible factors that enabled Bochkareva's unit to perform as well as they did, despite their limited training and time to organize.

Many viewed the Women's Battalion of Death as a strategic-level failure, since they were never able to overcome the popular support for the Bolshevik's anti-war propaganda, and thus, convince the Russian men to go back to the front to defend Russia. General Sir Alfred Knox, observed, "The heroic effort of these women had no effect on the men, who were past shame."<sup>185</sup> Despite this strategic failure, Bochkareva's efforts produced untold smaller victories, and she remained as an important footnote in history. Emmeline Pankhurst, quite famous and influential in her own right, hailed Bochkareva as "the greatest woman of the century."<sup>186</sup> Even at the end of the Century, Bochkareva, as enigmatic a character as she might have been, may still, arguably, be considered as one of the greatest women of the last 100 years.<sup>187</sup>

Against tremendous odds, Maria Bochkareva lifted herself from impoverished, illiterate obscurity, and became a patriot on several levels. At the individual level, she joined the army as a combatant, and went on to demonstrate her skills and bravery for more than two years in a male unit. In addition to earning Russia's highest military award for distinguished service, the Cross of St George, she also was severely wounded three times and yet, each time, returned to the front after convalescing. Without any formal leadership training, she convinced the national leaders of the need, and then developed a new program for women's fighting units in a very



brief amount of time. Her oratory skills and ability to motivate people to commit their lives to a cause were evident across a wide spectrum, from individual to strategic. Despite the risk of personal danger, Bochkareva never abandoned her perceived patriotic quest to “save Russia.” In July 1917, a correspondent declared Bochkareva as the modern parallel to France’s Joan of Arc. Levine, her biographer added: “Indeed in the annals of history since the Maid of Orleans we encounter no feminine figure equal to Bochkareva. Like Joan of Arc, this Russian peasant girl dedicated her life to her country’s cause.”<sup>188</sup> Similarly, not only in leading soldiers in battle, like Joan of Arc, Bochkareva was executed for her efforts in defending her country. In an era when young people are looking for heroic icons in which to pattern their lives, Bochkareva’s drive and bravery can be regarded as not only a source of Russian pride, but universally, as well. The stories of Maria Bochkareva and her fighting women are not told in Russia today. Her episodes were rejected as unpatriotic and villainized by Stalin’s regime, and remain buried to this day as propaganda.<sup>189</sup> After examining her life in the context of the times, her story has the potential to be remembered as a powerful symbol of Russian character and of their national values. Russian school children may see in her story, that one person, can in fact, make a difference. Beyond the value gained through examination of Maria Bochkareva’s experience in combat, she was an amazing person—who is worthy of being remembered as someone who brings honor to the ordinary people of Russia, both past and present. In the final analysis, her efforts produced the first tangible example of women as combatants for future generations to study.

WORD COUNT = 21,732

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Regina Pennington, Wings, Women and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 2001), x.

<sup>2</sup> Bessie Beatty, The Red Heart of Russia (New York, The Century Co., 1918), 112.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Loring Goldman, The Utilization of Women in Combat: An Historical and Social Analysis of Twentieth-Century Wartime and Peacetime Experience (US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Technical Report No. 563, January 1982), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Pennington, 1. She quotes from John Keegan's book, A History of Warfare (New York: Knopf, 1993), 76.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 226. Pennington sites Richard Abraham's book, Alexander Kerensky: The First Love of the Revolution, (440); Mikhail Rodzianko was the Chairman of the Duma at the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917. (Richard Pipes, A Concise History of the Russian Revolution, (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York: NY, 1995, pg 74).

<sup>7</sup> "Women in Combat" Military Review 82, no. 6 (November/December 2002): 55-74.

<sup>8</sup> According to The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution, published in 1998 and edited by Harold Shukman, 'Maria Leontievna Bochkareva' is the official way of spelling her name in English. Throughout the various journalistic reports of the day, there was a lack of consistency in the spelling due to transliteration issues. Even in her memoirs, her name is spelled "Botchareva." This spelling, however, is not as correct. Her name is pronounced: "Boch-kar-YO-va." (The issue of settling on the English translation of her name is also found in Regina Pennington's, Wings, Women and War, p. 225).

<sup>9</sup> Rosemarie Skaine, Women at War: Gender Issues of Americans in Combat (Jeffersonville: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1999), 46.

<sup>10</sup> Jeanne Holm, Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution (Novato: Presidio Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> William B. Breuer, War and American Women, Heroism, Deeds, and Controversy (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1997), 8; Vickie Lewis, Side-By-Side: A Photographic History of American Women in War (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1999), 51; Vicki L. Friedl, Women in the United States Military, 1901-1995 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 57.

<sup>14</sup> Breuer, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, 53.



<sup>16</sup> Friedl, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Holm, 10.

<sup>18</sup> "American Women and the Military," available from <<http://www.gendergap.com/military/USmil4.htm>>; Internet; accessed 16 October 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Friedl, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Carolyn M. Feller and Constance J. Moore, ed., Highlights in the History of the Army Nurse Corps U.S. Army Center of Military History (Washington, D.C.: 1995), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Holm, 10;

<sup>22</sup> "American Red Cross Nursing- World War I," available from <<http://www.redcross.org/museum/vmuseum/nursing.html>>; Internet; accessed 16 October 2002; Breuer, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Breuer, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Nancy Goldman and Richard Stites, British Women in Two World Wars—And After (University of Chicago: Inter-University Seminar on the Armed Forces and Society, January 1982), 87-96.

<sup>26</sup> Jeff Tuten, The Utilization of Women in Combat: The Germans Past Practice, Perspective, and Prospects (University of Chicago: Inter-University Seminar on the Armed Forces and Society, January 1982), 72.

<sup>27</sup> Tuten, 69-74.

<sup>28</sup> William Shepherd, "The Soul That Stirs in Battalions of Death," The Delineator 92, no. 3 (March 1918): 5.

<sup>29</sup> Eliot Anne Griesse and Richard Stites, Russian and Soviet Women in War and Peace (University of Chicago: Inter-University Seminar on the Armed Forces and Society, January 1982), 24.

<sup>30</sup> There were two principle revolutions in 1917. If using the Western Calendar, the first revolution occurred in March, and brought about the abdication of the Tsar and the instillation of the Provisional Government. The second revolution occurred in November, in which the Bolsheviks wrestled the government away from Alexander Kerensky and ended the Provisional Government. This sequence of events quickly lead to Russia's signing a peace agreement with Germany at Brest-Litovsk and a civil war between the Bolsheviks (Reds) and the counter-revolutionaries (Whites).

<sup>31</sup> This paper will use dates from the Western calendar as the standard. At the time of the Revolution, Russia was still using the Julian calendar, which was 13 days behind the Western calendar. The March Revolution began in the streets of Petrograd on 6 Mar 1917 (23 Feb) and

culminated on 13 March when the Tsar gave up the throne and the Duma created a Provisional Government who was to continue the war, enact social reforms, and design a new constitutional structure for the government. (Information from the editorial notes of Eduard Dune, which is translated and edited by Diane P. Koenker and S. A. Smith) Notes of a Red Guard. 27-29.

<sup>32</sup> Griesse and Stites, 25.

<sup>33</sup> "Warrior Women," The Literary Digest 50 (19 June 1915): 1460.

<sup>34</sup> Griesse and Stites, 29.

<sup>35</sup> "Russia's Women Soldiers," The Literary Digest 55 (25 August 1917): 20.

<sup>36</sup> "Warrior Women," 1460.

<sup>37</sup> "Russian Amazons," The New York Times Current History: The European War 5 (1915): 162.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Graham, Russia and the World (London: Cassell and Company, LTD, 1915), 88.

<sup>39</sup> Wasyly D. Kurdyla, "Battalion Smerti" New York City, 1917–1919. (COL Vakhtang Kapanadze, a Georgian officer and student of the United States Army War College, Class of 2003, translated this pamphlet, recently purchased off eBay and found in the private collection of Dr. Lawrence M. Kaplan.)

<sup>40</sup> "Young Girls Fighting on the Russian Front," The New York Times Current History: The European War 7 (April-June 1916): 366.

<sup>41</sup> Griesse and Stites, 29.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Goldman and Stities, 90.

<sup>44</sup> "Warrior Women," 1460. References an article in the London's *Graphic Magazine*.

<sup>45</sup> "The Execution of Edith Cavell," The Great Events of the War 3 (1920); Charles F. Horne and Walter F. Austin, eds, National Alumni, 369-371.

<sup>46</sup> Don Levine and Maria Botchkareva, Yashka – My Life as a Peasant, Officer and Exile (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1919), 76.

<sup>47</sup> "Warrior Women," 1460.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1460.

<sup>49</sup> "Young Girls Fighting on the Russian Front," 365-367.

<sup>50</sup> Eduard Dune, (Translated and edited by Diane P. Koenker and S. A. Smith) Notes of a Red Guard (Urban and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), xi.

<sup>51</sup> The Romanov Dynasty lasted for several centuries (1645-1917). Tsar Nicholas II abdicated on behalf of a relative, the Grand Duke Constantine, who refused to accept the throne. This was the end of the Dynasty. (Dr. Craig Nation)

<sup>52</sup> Esmond Wright, ed., "Revolution in Russia," Encyclopedia of Modern Warfare (London: Chancellor Press, 1992), 338.

<sup>53</sup> "Alexander Kerensky," Encyclopedia Encarta 2001 ed.

<sup>54</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 164-168.

<sup>55</sup> Beatty, 75-97.

<sup>56</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, vii – ix.

<sup>57</sup> S.V.Drokov, Introductory Article from the "Reports from Interrogations of the Organizer of the Petrograd Women's Death Battalion," 2.

<sup>58</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 3-5; S.V.Drokov, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 3-14.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-26.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-35.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-44. There is a certain Russian tradition, dating from the exile of the Decembrists that favors wives joining their spouses in exile. (Dr. Craig Nation, USAWC)

<sup>63</sup> S.V.Drokov, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 45-60.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>68</sup> It is important to note that the entire account of her background comes from Bochkareva's own memoir, and may be somewhat exaggerated or embellished. There are no other documents found that could support or deny their occurrence, but the facts of her birth and parenthood do check out with the town records, as found in her final interrogation reports. (S.V. Drokov)

<sup>69</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 73.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-87.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-93.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-100

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-109.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-122.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-134.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-136. A well-placed member of the Imperial family murdered Grigorii Rasputin.  
(Dr. Craig Nation)

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-145.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-153.

<sup>80</sup> The Taurida Palace is the place where the Duma met.

<sup>81</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 154-158.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-164.

<sup>83</sup> General P. A. Polovtsoff, Glory and Downfall, Reminiscences of a Russian General Staff Officer (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1935), 220.

<sup>84</sup> Levine and Bochkareva, 165; Rheta Dorr reports that the male instructors were of the finest caliber and that all of them had proven their gallantry and were recipients of the St. George's Cross. (Rheta Childe Dorr, Inside the Russian Revolution, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1917, 54)

<sup>85</sup> There is a conflict in the various reports as to how much training the "Women's Battalion of Death" actually received. According to Bochkareva's memoirs, the new recruits were signing in to the unit on 22 May 1917, the day after her speech in the Mariynski Theater. Again, in accordance with her memoirs, they marched to the Kazan Cathedral for their final send-off on 24 June 1917. If these dates are correct, they had approximately 4 weeks to improcess the women and train them for combat. Journalists of the day, however, record that the day that the battalion departed for the front as 6 July, which would have given them another two weeks of training. (Levine and Botchkareva, 162,192; and Rheta Dorr, 59.

<sup>86</sup> Rheta Childe Dorr, Inside the Russian Revolution (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), 56.

<sup>87</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 164.

<sup>88</sup> "Russian Women Soldiers," 20; Prince Lobanov-Rostovsky, The Grinding Mill: Reminiscences of War and Revolution in Russia, 1913-1920 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935) 237; and Thompson, 257. According to Prince Lobanov-Rostovsky's memoirs, The Grinding Mill, Battalions of Death were strictly volunteers, composed only of officers, who came together to continue the fighting after the discipline in the front-line units had broken down so badly, that fighting was becoming ineffective. Other sources, however, indicate that many of these "squadrons of death" were not just manned by officers, but those strictly loyal to the Provisional Government's decision to continue to resist the Germans. Thompson reports that one such Death Battalion was formed by old men, some of them 70 years old. In the so-called "Kerensky Offensive" in the summer of 1917, these 'Battalions of Death' sprang up in an effort to save the country from being overrun in the midst of the revolutionary fever.

<sup>89</sup> "Those Russian Women," The Literary Digest 55, (29 September 1917): 51.

<sup>90</sup> Donald C. Thompson, Donald Thompson in Russia (New York: Century Co., 1918) 268.

<sup>91</sup> Polovtsoff, 221.

<sup>92</sup> Don Duffy, "Women's Battalion of Death," Military Heritage (August 2002): 49.

<sup>93</sup> Lobanov-Rostovsky, 237.

<sup>94</sup> Beatty, 101

<sup>95</sup> Dorr, 57.

<sup>96</sup> Thompson 271.

<sup>97</sup> Shepherd, 6.

<sup>98</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 168-171.

<sup>99</sup> Thompson, 272-273.

<sup>100</sup> Shepherd, 5.

<sup>101</sup> Dorr, 59-61, 63.

<sup>102</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 166-168.

<sup>103</sup> "Russian Women Soldiers," 51.

<sup>104</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 168.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-183.

<sup>106</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 184.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 187-188. In the company of three Allied Generals, she dined with three of the most powerful men in Russia - Kerensky, Rodzianko and Kornilov. While she did not understand much of the conversation, as it was 'in foreign tongues,' this was another example of the almost unimaginable position of influence that this illiterate peasant woman had risen to.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 218-247.

<sup>109</sup> Bessie Beatty, "We Fight For Russia," Women's Home Companion 45 (Mar 1918): 10.

<sup>110</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 190-191.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>112</sup> Duffy, 49.

<sup>113</sup> John Laffin, Women in Battle (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1967), 58.

<sup>114</sup> Thompson, 272-273.

<sup>115</sup> Duffy, 49; Emmeline Pankhurst had been in Russia for several months and was a key endorser of the Women's Battalion of Death. In fact, she was acting as a representative of the English premier, Mr. Lloyd George, in an attempt to support the Provisional Government and oppose the Bolsheviks or other extremists. She had been an encouraging daily visitor of the battalion, and was loved by all the soldiers. Mrs. Pankhurst succeeded in organizing a group of strong and influential women leaders, but Kerensky, for some reason, was not happy about her program and tried to deter her efforts. In Rheta Dorr's book, she enumerates Mrs. Pankhurst's two motives: to help England and her allies to win the war, and because they saw women's participation in the war as a furtherance of their cause for women's suffrage. They felt confident that grateful nations would offer women the right to vote as their reward for unselfish war services. (Thompson, 274 and Dorr, 189-190)

<sup>116</sup> Thompson, 274.

<sup>117</sup> Dorr, 58-60.

<sup>118</sup> Shepherd, 5.

<sup>119</sup> Shepherd, 5-6; Duffy 50; and Dorr, 62-69.

<sup>120</sup> A verst is approximately 2/3 of a mile.

<sup>121</sup> Dorr, 78-80.

<sup>122</sup> Beatty, "We Fight For Russia," 11.

<sup>123</sup> Dorr, 66-67.

<sup>124</sup> Dorr, 54-56. This author spent several weeks with the "Women's Battalion of Death" at the front lines before the battle, and got to know the women well. She offers the highest praise

to the adjutant, Maria Skridlova. Skridlova was 20 years old, and quite attractive. She was born into aristocracy, educated abroad, and spoke several languages. At the beginning of the conflict she took nurses training in the Red Cross, and had already proven her bravery and patriotism at the outbreak of the Revolution when many of the troops tried to murder their officers, whom she tried to defend. Interestingly, her father, Admiral Skirdloff, a highly respected veteran of two wars (including the Russo-Japanese War), went with her to the women's barracks to present his daughter for enrollment in the Battalion. He had also served as the Minister of the Navy (Marine) during the Tsarist period.

<sup>125</sup> Beatty, "We Fight for Russia," 11.

<sup>126</sup> Duffy, 50 and Dorr, 75.

<sup>127</sup> Beatty, The Red Heart of Russia, 110.

<sup>128</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 208-210.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-218.

<sup>130</sup> Duffy, 50.

<sup>131</sup> Beatty, The Red Heart of Russia, 109; Harold Shukman, ed, The Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988), 308; Dorr, 74; and Shepherd, 6; The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution, gives Bochkareva's unit credit for capturing 2,000 prisoners. Several other sources probably more accurately report that their regiment captured one hundred German prisoners, two of whom were officers. In fact, UP correspondent William Shepherd reports that six of these German prisoners were German women dressed in private's uniforms. This is startling information for the twenty-first century reader, since Germany was the strictest of all the countries in their use of women as uniformed soldiers, much less combatants. Other sources however, corroborate the fact that Germans were actually using women as combatants.

<sup>132</sup> Florence Farmborough, With the Armies of the Tsar: A Nurse at the Russian Front 1914-18. (New York: Stein and Day, 1974), 305.

<sup>133</sup> Dorr, 74; Beatty, The Red Heart of Russia, 109; and Shepherd, 6.

<sup>134</sup> Duffy, 50.

<sup>135</sup> Dorr, 75.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>138</sup> Beatty, "We Fight for Russia," 75.

<sup>139</sup> Shepherd, 6.

<sup>140</sup> The weapons used Russian by units at that time were magazine fed, M1891 Moisin Nagant. (Dr. Lawrence M. Kaplan, Center for Military History, United States Army.)

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Pennington's entire book expands on the extraordinary capabilities of women soldiers of WWII, with a special emphasis on Russian airwomen

<sup>143</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 222-223.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 224-240.

<sup>145</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 241-254.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>147</sup> Beatty, The Red Heart of Russia, 114.

<sup>148</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 264-334.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 335-337.

<sup>150</sup> Farmborough, 408.

<sup>151</sup> Duffy, 90.

<sup>152</sup> H.J. Whigham, "The Colonel as We Saw Him," Metropolitan 49, no. 4 (March 1919): 8.

<sup>153</sup> Don Isaac Levine, Eyewitness to History: Memoirs and Reflections of a Foreign Correspondent for Half a Century (New York: A Martin Dale Book Hawthorne Books, INC., 1973), 53-54.

<sup>154</sup> Edward Ironside, Archangel 1918-1919 (London: Constable, 1953), 76.

<sup>155</sup> Kornilov and Kolchak were considered two of the Bolsheviks worst enemies. It is unclear as to whether Bochkareva understood this and was therefore truly an enemy of the Bolsheviks, or whether she was naïve, and just sought the same authoritarian sponsors she had known in the past. (Dr. Craig Nation, USAWC)

<sup>156</sup> Sergei Vladimirovich Drokova, "Organizator Zhenskogo Bat'ona Smerti." ["The Organizer of the Women's Battalion of Death."] Voprosy Istorii [Questions of History] 7 (1993): 164-170. (The introductory comments are translated with the following title: Reports from Interrogations of the Organizer of the Petrograd Women's Death Battalion.) The final details of Bochkareva's life have been recently made known through the translation of her "Interrogation Reports" of the VChK (Revolutionary Military Committee) from January - May 1920. These documents provide Bochkareva's testimony of what she did after returning to Russia, and the comments/opinions of the interrogators after the interviews.



<sup>157</sup> Ibid. This document was translated into English by LTC Michael Zieba, U.S. Army Officer, in December 2002. The original reports of First Lieutenant Maria Bochkareva's interrogations were stored in the archives of a department of the Ministry of Security of the Russian Federation in the Omsk Oblast. The investigations were conducted by the VChK, the Revolutionary Military Committee, and it was 36 pages in length. Since the last pages in the report are renumbered, there appears to be a 21 April 1920 report missing, which would help to understand the basis for the decision on by representatives of the Siberian Emergency Revolutionary Tribunal, formed by I.P. Pavlunovsky on 15 May 1920. This final report concludes with the directive "to shoot Maria Leont'evna Bochkareva." Additional note – the record does not recognize her apparent promotion to Captain that Bochkareva had mentioned in her memoirs.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., Report No. 2, dated 28 Mar 1920. Bochkareva's testimony indicates that the majority of the 1500 women in the other Petrograd Regiment were the same women who left (walked out) Bochkareva's original women's battalion.

<sup>159</sup> Dorr, 81-83; and Shepherd, 56.

<sup>160</sup> "Great Army of Women Forming in Russia," New York Times, 3 August 1917, 2.

<sup>161</sup> Times History 16 (London: "The Times" Printing House Square, 1917), 305. The picture in *Times History* states that Madame Skvortzova was both the organizer and commander of that unit.

<sup>162</sup> Shepherd, 56.

<sup>163</sup> Louise Bryant, Six Red Months in Russia (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), 210-219. This American journalist dedicated an entire Chapter of her book (Chapter XXI: Women Soldiers) to Russian women soldiers. She describes how the women soldiers were divided ideologically in two hostile camps. She interviewed several of the girls as the original Women's Battalion of Death was breaking up; capturing their feelings for the apparent failure of the unit. Bryant felt that it was not that the women weren't brave or capable enough, but that they, like the men soldiers were hurled into the "maelstrom" of class struggle. It appeared that many of the girls joined the Women's Battalion of Death for patriotic reasons, to defend their homeland from the Germans, but became disillusioned. One of the girls interviewed, Anna Shub, captured the reason she felt betrayed as being the ultimate mission of the Women's Battalion of Death. "I left everything because I thought the poor soldiers were tired after fighting so many years, and I thought we ought to help them. When I arrived in Petrograd I began to see the truth; we were supposed to be shaming the soldiers. I felt as if I myself could die of shame." Similarly, many of the girls were disillusioned by the reality of their experience. Many of them came from little towns, even without the blessing of their parents, for this 'higher calling' of the revolution; a cause for which they were willing to give their lives. But instead of being treated like heroes by their male counterparts, they were treated with scorn and insulted for being militarists and enemies of the revolution. This ideological rift put many of the girls at odds with their leader, Bochkareva. Because of their confusion over that was the real enemy, the Germans or those who were going to suppress the people (class struggle), conflict broke out in this unit that was supposed to be founded on discipline. Many of the girls, caught up in the inconsistencies of their reality did not want to fight against their male contemporaries, which subsequently caused their leader to call them "cowards" and taunt them for running away. This

ideological and physiological conflict greatly impacted the relationship between Bochkareva's battalion and all the others.

<sup>164</sup> "Great Army of Women Forming in Russia," New York Times, 3 August 1917, 2.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid; and "Russia's Women Soldiers," 20.

<sup>166</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 222.

<sup>167</sup> Orrin Wightman, The Diary of an American Physician in the Revolution, 1917 (New York: Brooklyn Daily Eagle Commercial Printing Department, 1928), 61.

<sup>168</sup> Shepherd, 56.

<sup>169</sup> In addition to the defense of the Winter Palace, the other combatant encounter was the Battle of Smorgon, in which Bochkareva's "Battalion of Death" participated.

<sup>170</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 255.

<sup>171</sup> Major-General Sir Alfred Knox, With the Russian Army 1915-1917: Being Chiefly Extracts from the Diary of a Military Attaché Volume II, (London: Hutchinson & Co. Paternoster Row, 1921), 705.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 708-709.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 711.

<sup>174</sup> Michael Posner, "The Battalion of Death," The Touchstone I, no. 5, September 1917,; 431.

<sup>175</sup> Major M. Nicholas Coppola, Major Kevin G. LaFrance and. Henry J. Carretta, "The Female Infantryman: A Possibility?" Military Review 82, no. 6, November-December 2002, 55.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 56. The author sites several examples of women's importance in combat during this previous century. "Without North Vietnamese female participation, the war might have ended differently. Vietnamese women were said to be 'vital to the struggle' and credited with 'carrying heavy loads over long distances.' They were also recognized as being able marksmen and snipers...Likewise, Soviet women fought alongside their male counterparts as infantry soldiers in many desperate battles against the Nazis. Japanese women were recruited as infantry soldiers in high school and died in hand-to-hand combat during World War II campaigns." Another source that demonstrates the use of women combatants in many different counties is found in David Trubys', Women at War.

<sup>177</sup> Shepherd, 5.

<sup>178</sup> The Times History of War 13 (London: "The Times" The Times Printing House Square, 1917), 464.

<sup>179</sup> Dorr, 79.

<sup>180</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, 213.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>182</sup> Beatty, "We fight for Russia," 75.

<sup>183</sup> Shepherd, 56.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Knox, 714.

<sup>186</sup> Skukman, 307.

<sup>187</sup> From a contemporary perspective, Maria Bochkareva was an enigmatic character. She was both a complicated and simple person at the same time. In fact, when studying her life, one cannot help but vacillate between intensely liking and disliking her as an individual, yet in the end, having respect for her powerful personality and accomplishments. In reading her memoirs, one is struck by her range of emotions and her single-minded focus; by her tolerance yet intolerance, her tenderness and sternness with her troops, her awareness of political intrigue, yet her complete ignorance in adjusting her behavior—which eventually led to her death. Isaac Don Levine, her biographer, describes her during their collaboration sessions as having shifting moods—going from angelic smiles to savage hate in a matter of moments. Early on in her life, when confronted by such devastating conditions as extreme poverty, a sense of hopelessness, and a pattern of beatings from her father, husband and "civil partner," she attempted to commit suicide at least three times. Here is a personality, forged in pain, which emerged with a strong and driving passion at the announcement of the war. According to her memoirs, her desire to save her country from being overrun and controlled by the Germans brought her life into focus and became her singular passion. This illiterate peasant woman, with her particular focus on defeating Russia's external enemies, would demonstrate an amazing pattern of uncompromised devotion to her cause. She not only convinced the Provisional Government leaders to resource her unusual idea of creating a women's infantry battalion, but she also held fiercely to her dangerous conviction about maintaining discipline in her unit—to the point of risking defiance with Kerensky. In her early years of soldiering, this woman, "Yashka," was adored by her male counterparts at the front, and later was loved by her own women soldiers. Yet at the same time, the women soldiers in the other regiments fiercely despised her. She was a personality who refused to bend to the informal truce with the Germans at the front for non-aggression, and nearly got herself and her unit lynched. So single-minded was she in combat against the Germans that she summarily executed one of her own soldiers whom she found making love during the battle. Once more, when personally invited to join up with Lenin and Trotsky after their take-over of the government in November 1917, she took a dangerous stand and accused them of selling out the country by withdrawing troops from the front without first negotiating a peace agreement.<sup>187</sup> It is unlikely that she didn't perceive at the time, that here was her opportunity to save herself and influence the future by becoming aligned with the new government in power. At great personal peril, she continued to remain faithful to her perceived patriotic cause. So determined and convincing was she, that she even persuaded British authorities to sneak her aboard a U.S. ship heading for America, and was subsequently given an office call with the President of the United States and with former President, Theodore Roosevelt. These examples demonstrate the fire of her spirit, and the many inconsistencies

that drove this huge personality. No doubt, without Maria Bochkareva, there would never have been any Russian women's combat units in WWI.

<sup>188</sup> Levine and Botchkareva, ix.

<sup>189</sup> Colonel Vaktang Kapanadze, a visiting Georgian officer at the United States Army War College (and former Soviet Officer), recounts that the memory of Maria Bochkareva and her soldiers are currently unknown in both Russia and Georgia. She and others were villainized as lesbians and enemies of the state by Stalin's regime. To date, there has been no acknowledgement of Bochkareva's contribution to the national patriots of WWI.



## APPENDIX A

Figure 1: Lewis, Vickie. Side-By-Side: A Photographic History of American Women in War. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1999, 50.

Figure 2: Period postcard dated 16 December 1916, obtained off an eBay auction listing 10 March 2003, owner unknown.

Figure 3: The Times History of War 8, London: "The Times" Printing House Square, 1916, 218.

Figure 4: Russell, Charles Edward. "Russia's Woman Warriors." Good Housekeeping 65 (October 1917): 22.

Figure 5: New York Times, 13 January 1917, Sunday Picture Section, no page.

Figure 6: Thompson, Captain Donald C. Blood Stained Russia. New York: Leslie-Judge Company Publishers, 1918, 109.

Figure 7: Thompson, Captain Donald C. Blood Stained Russia. New York: Leslie-Judge Company Publishers, 1918, 115.

Figure 8: Russell, Charles Edward. "Russia's Woman Warriors." Good Housekeeping 65 (October 1917): 23.

Figure 9: Times History 16, London: "The Times" Printing House Square, 1917, 305.

Figure 10: Beatty, Bessie. The Red Heart of Russia. New York: The Century Co., 1918, 116.

Figure 11: New York Times, 93 August 1917, Sunday Picture Section, 1.



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