

Boise State University

**ScholarWorks**

---

2018 Graduate Student Showcase

Graduate Student Showcases

---

April 2018

## **Women in Combat: Russian Women in WWII**

Hayley Noble

*Boise State University*

---

## Women in Combat: Russian Women in WWII

### Abstract

Integration of women into combat roles within the U.S. military was announced in December 2015. Criticisms continue to arise questioning the capabilities of women, discussing training standards, performance results, and combat effectiveness. My project seeks to persuade those opposed to the decision that women can succeed on the battlefield by using examples from World War II. Russia utilized up to a million women, fully demonstrating their potential. Their experiences prove women can perform comparable to men. These examples are relevant, both in politics and society, when debating gender, deeply entrenched cultural norms, governmental policies, and the direction military is headed.

### Keywords

World War II, Soviet Union, women in combat, military history, Russian women, gender roles



# WOMEN IN COMBAT: RUSSIAN WOMEN IN WWII

HAYLEY NOBLE, HISTORY DEPARTMENT

“Altogether I carried 481 wounded soldiers from under fire. One of the journalists counted them up: a whole infantry battalion. We hauled men two or three times our weight. When they’re wounded they’re still heavier. You carry him, his weapon, plus there’s his overcoat, boots. So you hoist some 180 pounds on your back and carry it. Unload it. Go for the next one.” Maria Petrovna Smirnova  
– Medic



PURPOSE OF RESEARCH: TO INFORM CURRENT DEBATE, SUPPORTING THE INTEGRATION OF WOMEN INTO COMBAT ROLES, WHILE EDUCATING THE PUBLIC.



SOVIET UNION MOBILIZED 800,000-1,000,000 WOMEN AS:

- SNIPERS
- MEDICS, DOCTORS, NURSES
- MACHINEGUNNERS
- ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNNERS
- DRIVERS
- RIFLEMEN
- MECHANICS
- TELEPHONE & RADIO OPERATORS
- PILOTS
- CLERKS
- ENGINEERS
- SCOUTS



*Fascism, the Most Evil Enemy of Women—*  
Propaganda poster by Nina Vatolina

Defense Secretary Carter’s 2015 announcement of the full integration of women into combat roles within the U.S. military prompted discussions regarding female capabilities in mechanized warfare. The decision was criticized by many citing lower achievement from women related to training standards, performance results, and combat effectiveness. Studies are continuously conducted to gauge these results, rather than examining real-world examples. By analyzing the experiences of Russian women on the Eastern front in World War II, these women proved they could perform comparable to the men they served next to.



These facts are important because to this day, people continue to question any achievement by women in the military, as seen with the Army’s Ranger School graduations. Many articles were published alluding to lowered standards in order for women to pass, which has since been debunked. Regardless, the same conversations are had whenever a new job within the military is opened to women. This research demonstrates that the repetitive argument against women going into combat is unfounded.



In this case, my research involved reading diaries, letters, memoirs, and oral histories from Russian women written during and after the war, supplemented by numerous secondary sources and translations. These accounts provide glimpses of life on the front and civilian life after service.



This research further influences the conversations surrounding:

- Gender equality
- Deeply entrenched cultural norms
- Governmental policies
- The future of the U.S. military



This research is part of a larger project which includes an exhibit that will be on public display. The goal of the exhibit is that the viewer will leave knowing more than they did before viewing, devoid of any doubt that females can serve in combat roles, convinced that women can do any job that men can.