

REVIEW ARTICLE: EASTERN EUROPE'S WOMEN IN WORLD WAR II

Жінки Центральної та Східної Європи у Другій світовій війні: гендерна специфіка досвіду в часи екстремального насильства: збірка наукових праць / за наук. ред. докторки істор. наук Г. Грінченко, канд. істор. наук К. Кобченко, канд. істор. наук О. Кісь. – Київ : ТОВ «АРТ КНИГА», 2015. – 335.

Central and East European Women in the Second World War: Gendered Experiences in a Time of Extreme Violence, edited by Gelinada Grinchenko, Kateryna Kobchenko, Oksana Kis' (Kyiv: Art Knyha, 2015), 335 pp.

“...what is it that makes us fulfill this and not that duty at certain moments in our lives; perhaps it was the desire to prove to the world that we, women, are capable of everything that threw us into the arms of war?”

—Olena Stepaniv, officer of the Ukrainian Sich Sharpshooters, 1915¹

War draws people into its whirlpool regardless of their gender or age. Both literary and historical studies tend to focus on men at war, but among this body of male centered heroic mythology a theme of women in war begins to appear, and not only as a passive victim or sad heroine who poetically awaits her hero from the front, but as an integral part of all aspects of war. *Women of Central and Eastern Europe in the Second World War* is dedicated precisely to the discussion of a variety of roles women played in World War II and to their experiences.

Articles by Kateryna Kobchenko and Carmen Scheide provide information and analysis on women in paramilitary organizations and the Red Army, in particular the various aspects of their time at the front. The volume also discusses the lives women had after the war, for instance, how they were perceived by the patriarchal society after returning from war and how they are represented in historiography. These are examined in Oksana Kis' article as well as a chapter by Olena Rozhdestvens'ka, Viktoriya Semenova, and Ol'ha

¹ Olena Stepaniv, “Zhinka-voiak,” in H. Svarnyk, A. Feloniuk, eds., *Olena Stepaniv – Roman Dashkevych. Spohady i narysy* (L'viv: Piramida, 2009), 80.

Nikitina-den Besten. Another section of the book, containing articles by Bernhard Strebelt and Tetiana Pastushenko, features a discussion of the experience of female prisoners of war. Olena Petrenko and Marta Havryshko examine experiences of female members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the 1940s–50s. Havryshko, in particular, analyzes the normalization of sexual behavior in the Ukrainian nationalist underground, the specificity of romantic relationships in such an environment, the de facto marriages, and the social status of women in such relationships. Volodymyr Hinda and Iryna Rebrova discuss gender aspects of the underground and partisan movement. Olena Stiazhkina and Andrea Petó examine survival methods of women under occupation. The plight of the Jewish women and the crimes committed against them during the Holocaust are relayed by Pascale Bos and Anatolii Podol's'kyi. Gelinada Grinchenko and Maria Melenchuk focus their works on the use of women as forced laborers. Perhaps one of the most difficult issues of the period discussed in the book, sexual violence perpetrated against women by the Nazi soldiers on the territory of the Soviet Union as well as similar atrocities perpetrated by the Red Army soldiers in Europe, is examined in the works of Regina Mühlhäuser and Jeffrey Burds. The book also contains articles by Anna Wylegała and Adrienne Harris about women's experiences of deportation and forced resettlement after the Second World War, and the postwar fate of women and their status in society respectively.

The articles collected in this volume discuss a variety of women's experiences in great detail, but also manage to provide an opportunity to see the broader picture of the impact that World War II had on women's lives, reflecting on certain aspects of societies in which these women lived. Thus, the multidimensional nature of this work allows the reader to see the complexity and heterogeneity of the question of women in the context of war. Still, certain aspects could be explored in more depth by the volume, for instance the perception of women's wartime experiences by different generations, in particular the elderly and the children who witnessed the war unfolding around them.

The topic of female experiences of war is very relevant not only because the issue has not been investigated in enough depth, but also because of the military conflict that is taking place in contemporary Ukraine. My personal interest in this collected volume has two dimensions: first, my grandmother Iryna Tymkevych (Yampil's'ka) (b. 1933) survived World War II as a child. She often told stories of how she and her mother lived during the war (her father was a political prisoner at the time). Second, during my studies I gained a particular interest in the roles women performed during World War I: this may indeed have been a decisive factor leading me to volunteer for the Ukrainian Voluntary Corps, which I joined at the start of the current conflict in the Donbas region.

In my personal experience of the war in Ukraine, I have observed that people often form their judgment as to women's participation in wars having little access to the knowledge of historically similar events. The articles contained in this volume are highly informative about the actual experiences of women during World War II, including those who were fighting in military formations, such as the Red Army, and are thus of much value in contemporary Ukraine. The authors describe a great number of difficulties that women had to face in the military during World War II. Speaking from personal experience, little has changed today.

As has been noted by several authors in the volume, in spite of the seeming emancipation of the pre-war years in the USSR, women and girls who wished to serve in the army were regarded with skepticism, and had to earn a serious attitude towards themselves through their hard work. The same situation can be observed in present-day Ukraine: initially, a new girl in a battalion is viewed with suspicion and curiosity to understand what sort of person she is and what she is doing in the army. Once people spend some time in the same environment, it becomes clearer who is who. It would not be fair to say that everybody I met was against women's participation in the war, but a fair amount of people held a view that warzone was no place for a woman. Men are usually brought up to think that a woman should cook and look after children and stay away from other tasks. That is why, in my view, women in the military are not taken seriously. At the same time, we are now faced

with a situation where a large number of men are trying to avoid mobilization while some women volunteer to join the army. In this context it is inaccurate to treat warfare as a purely male domain.

Another aspect discussed in the volume that remains relevant today is one of the most widespread difficulties faced by women who fight in the army: both during and after World War II many women who had served in the army faced unfounded insults, gossip, and humiliation based on the assumption of their promiscuity. While their presumed sexual behavior was discussed by society, their military achievements remained overlooked. This reaction to their military past led many women to hide their military service. Through my own experience of being involved in the military I have come to learn that such prejudices are still widespread especially among the older generation, in particular, in rural areas of Ukraine. Many elderly women I encountered claimed that promiscuity was the only reason why a girl would join the army.

The problem of the perception of women who fight in the war is likely to continue to exist in Ukraine because of the lack of appropriate education about the women who have fought in wars in the past. At my younger sister's school, while talking about the ongoing Ukrainian anti-terrorist operation, a teacher commented that involvement in such an activity was not for women. Nevertheless, many battalions have women fighting in them. Of course, it is not a mass phenomenon, but women do serve as fighters, medics, and in other professions. There are women in my and in other battalions who have participated in combat. Every person's motives for joining the army are different, but it is clear that these women want to defend their country, to do something for it.

In her article on the key themes and approaches in Western feminist historiography, Oksana Kis' quotes Alyson Cole saying that "[w]ar has a paradoxical impact on feminism: it forecloses feminism by reinforcing patriarchal structures, yet at the same time it often requires women to act without men, which can catalyze feminism" (p. 17).² A similar process might be taking place in Ukraine. Ukrainian society is not homogenous in its view of women's

² See Alyson V Cole, "The Postfeminist Dilemma," *Women's Review of Books* 25, no. 4 (2008): 21-23 (22).

participation in war. Ukrainian law prohibits women's participation in combat as well as access to a number of other occupations in the army, however, in reality, women in the Donbas serve in different roles, including those that are considered to be traditionally masculine.³ The reality of women's ability or inability to participate in combat largely depends on the local battalion command. During World War II women had to take on "masculine" roles, for which they were not prepared in peacetime, but which they performed well nevertheless. As is demonstrated in Olena Stiazhkina's article, when it came to the need of the authorities to secure the workforce, the "special status" of women and their supposed inability to perform certain tasks were immediately forgotten.

The book rightly states that women are not a homogeneous body: they come from different social strata, they come from towns and villages, they differ regionally, ethnically, according to age, education, religious beliefs, and marital and financial status. The experiences of these different women in times of war also differ and have to be studied in their complexity, not only to make sure that the past is better understood but also to help us understand the current military conflicts. This collection of articles is unique in Ukraine as it addresses issues that have been neglected in the historiography and which continue to suffer from insufficient investigation. The publication of the volume is very timely as it can give a start to a wide range of further research that remains in the darkness of male centered history.

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³ See Decree no 337, 27 May 2014, which details the changes made to the list of positions in the armed forces of Ukraine which are open to women, "Nakaz 27.05.2014 No 286 Pro zatverdzhennia tymchasovykh perelikiv viis'kovo-oblikovykh spetsial'nostei i shtatnykh posad riadovoho, serzhants'koho i starshyns'koho skladu ta viis'kovosluzhbovtziv-zhinok i taryfnykh perelikiv posad vyshchezaznachenykh viis'kovosluzhbovtziv," *Minoborony Ukrainy*, <http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0600-14/paran16#n16> (accessed 26 January 2016).

