

Women and Militarisation: The Lessons of World War II

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16743602>

CITATION: Zaliatok, Nataliia, and Steve John Aarav. 'Women and Militarization: The Lessons of World War II'. *Transnational Journal of Arts, Humanities and Sciences* 1, no. 1 (July 2025).

ABSTRACT

Amid numerous armed conflicts today, militarization is a priority for many countries, heightening the urgency of examining its impact on women, particularly those in the military. This article focuses on the comparative analysis of several aspects of women's military service in the USSR and Great Britain during World War II to show how these states mobilized women to meet military needs in wartime while still maintaining gender hierarchies. The findings call for a substantial reevaluation of gender roles in military contexts and underscore the importance of inclusive and equitable policies for servicewomen in contemporary defense strategies.

Keywords: Great Britain, militarization, USSR, women, women in the military, World War II

INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of a number of armed conflicts around the world, including Russia's war against Ukraine, the Israel– Hamas war, and others, militarization is high on the agenda of many countries. This means that the impact of militarization on women, in particular those serving in the military, is also becoming more urgent to both society in general and to governments. Since the field of my expertise is the comparative study of women's military service in the USSR and Great Britain as members

of the anti-Hitler coalition during World War II,¹ I would like to draw attention to the several aspects connected with the general principles for the organization of women's military service, demobilization, and coverage of these issues in the media at that time to show how these states mobilized women to serve the needs of the state while also reinforcing gender hierarchies. I hope that the lessons of the past will help us to avoid some of the practices of the last century that perpetuate the marginalized status of women in the military.

General Principles for the Organization of Women's Military Service

During World War II, the USSR and Great Britain managed to recruit a significant number of women into the army. According to Beate Fieseler, M. Michaela Hampf, and Jutta Schwarzkopf, the maximum number of servicewomen in Great Britain—470,700 or 9.39 percent of the country's military—was reached in 1943. In the USSR, there were approximately one million servicewomen, or about 3 percent of army personnel.² At the same time, the significant numbers of women in both countries' armed forces during the war did not lead to substantial changes in the military. The British and Soviet experiences of World War II suggest that states intensify efforts to attract women to military service when the situation at the front is difficult and the state lacks sufficient numbers of men to cover its needs. Governments recruit women as an auxiliary force on conditions that are beneficial for the state at that moment and often without proper measures aimed at providing more or less comfortable conditions for the women, their substantial moral and physical training, and a proper recognition of their role as defenders of the state. For example, the British government postponed the creation of women's services in the armed forces in the 1930s and limited the available range of positions for women mainly to "female professions" at the beginning of the war.³ As the conflict escalated, this circle expanded significantly, women's services were granted military status, and the recruitment of women to them was no longer purely voluntary. However, British servicewomen were not given equal status with their brothers-in-arms. In particular, restrictions banned them from using weapons and holding combat positions.

¹ Zalietok, *Zhinky na vijs'kovij sluzhbi*; Zalietok, "British and Soviet Women"; Zalietok, "Male Veterans' Perception"; Zalietok, "Women's Service in British and Soviet Publications."

² Fieseler, Hampf, and Schwarzkopf, "Gendering Combat," 116.

³ Zalietok, "Governments' Policies on Paramilitary Organizations"

But the widespread notion that British women did not perform combat tasks during World War II is only partially correct. For example, despite official limitations, the authorities recruited female personnel for air defense. Those positions can be considered noncombatant only conditionally. As D'Ann Campbell notes, this recruitment was accomplished "by not formally classifying these AA jobs as combat and by symbolically prohibiting the women from pulling the lanyard."⁴ Women in air defense officially loaded weapons, attached fuses to artillery shells, detected enemy aircraft, and directed gunners to open fire.⁵ The validity of the assertion that British servicewomen did not take a direct part in the destruction of the enemy was questioned as early as the 1940s. For example, General Frederick Pile observed that "There is not much essential difference between manning a G.L. set or a predictor and firing a gun: both are means of destroying an enemy aircraft."⁶ In addition, more recent studies, notably by Roger Broad⁷ and Carol Harris,⁸ showed that the official ban on the use of lethal weapons by women had sometimes been violated as well. However, none of this stopped the British authorities from claiming that women served exclusively in noncombat roles. Such claims suggest that the official restrictions in the British armed forces were aimed not at the protection and comfort of women, but at maintaining the current gender order with traditional roles for women and men.

In the USSR, the involvement of women in the military and the formation of female combat units often occurred covertly. Pre-war rhetoric highlighted the equality between men and women, and the possibility for the latter to defend the state with weapons in their hands, if necessary. At the beginning of the German-Soviet war, however, a shift took place in public discourse that positioned women as victims of enemy aggression and workers at the rear (military industry, agriculture, etc.), as well as nurses and doctors (these positions were considered "female"). The collective image of the female population as being in need of protection was the leading one in Soviet propaganda aimed at boosting the morale of the armed forces. At first, the authorities disavowed data that Soviet women held a wide range of positions in the military, too. As the situation on the fronts became more complicated and women's recruitment to the army increased, the Soviet government could no longer completely

⁴ Campbell, "Women in Combat," 313.

⁵ Noakes, *Women in the British Army*, 116.

⁶ Pile, *Ack-Ack*, 186; "Olive's Story," BBC History

⁷ Broad, *Conscription in Britain*, 151.

⁸ Harris, *Women at War in Uniform*, 39

hide their activities, including involvement in hostilities. When the government did discuss military women, it focused mostly on examples of individual heroines, which did not give an accurate idea of the scale of women's presence in the army.⁹

Neither Great Britain nor the USSR adequately met the basic needs of service-women at the beginning of the war, suggesting the unplanned nature of their mass involvement in the army. For example, British female veterans pointed to shortages of uniforms, logistical difficulties, and other inconveniences in the early years of the war.¹⁰ The Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) faced particularly significant issues. By the end of 1940, 30 percent of British women who had voluntarily joined this organization had left due to the harsh conditions.¹¹ In early 1942, British Command even established a special commission to inspect the living conditions in three women's services—the ATS, Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), and Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS). Gradually, the British government was able to resolve these issues.

Likewise, the Soviet government also was unable to effectively organize the service of women in the army. Women soldiers faced a shortage of military uniforms, footwear, hygiene supplies, and so on.¹² According to the memoirs of veteran S. Kuntsevich, she was issued with men's uniforms and footwear that were several sizes too large. Her comrades teased her because of this, calling her a "scarecrow."¹³ However, by 1942, when the presence of women in the army increased significantly, the government managed to provide most of them with proper uniforms and equipment.¹⁴

During the war, both states shifted from voluntary to forced mobilization of certain categories of women (although not on an equal basis with men). Thus, while at the end of 1941 women in the USSR still joined the army voluntarily, by 1942 they were already under pressure.¹⁵ That year saw the largest number of mobilizations.¹⁶

For the first two years of the war, women enlisted in the British service on a

⁹ Jug, "All Stalin's Men?" II; Zaliotok, "Women's Service in British and Soviet Publications," 221–251; Zaliotok, *Zhinky na vjjs'kovij sluzhbi*, 177–231, 264–294

¹⁰ Gwendoline Saunders, Oral history, IWM, cat. no. 9106, reel 2; Lambert, Oral history, IWM, cat. no. 20797, reels 2–3.

¹¹ Broad, *Conscription in Britain*, 151

¹² Barsukova, "Zhenshhiny v vooruzhennyh silah," 11–12

¹³ Saywell, *Women in War*, 135.

¹⁴ *Postanovlenie GKO SSSR*, nos. 1488, 1595, and 1703ss.

¹⁵ Markwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 36.

¹⁶ *Velikaia Otechestvennaia bez grifa sekretnosti*, 38.

voluntary basis.¹⁷ However, due to massive personnel needs, on 18 December 1941, for the first time in the history of Great Britain, military authorities instituted a draft for women.¹⁸ According to its conditions, single British women and childless widows aged 20–30 were called up with the possibility of choosing between service in one of three women’s organizations, civil defense, and employment in the military industry.¹⁹

Representation of Service women in the Media

An extremely important component in the context of the perception of women in the military is the construction of their image in the media. In this regard, there were significant differences in the coverage of women’s military service during World War II in British and Soviet periodicals, although in the media of both countries, military women were not presented as a full-fledged and broad category of defenders of the fatherland. In Great Britain, which was a democratic country, the media were a much more reliable source of information than in the totalitarian USSR. British periodicals were actively used to recruit women for military service, and they published quite detailed information about the number of servicewomen, the activities of the three women’s services, the range of positions available in them, the level of pay, living conditions, and so forth.²⁰ The media repeatedly emphasized the importance of the work of women in the military, but constantly underlined the auxiliary nature of such service—women were to join the army to free up men to perform combat duties.²¹ Frequently, media emphasized the importance of servicewomen having an attractive appearance, and many newspaper articles resorted to objectification and hinted at the possibility of finding a worthy groom during their service.²² On the eve of the end of the war and immediately afterwards, newspapers

¹⁷ Dorothy Margaret Williams, oral history, IWM, cat. no. 9440, reel 2.

¹⁸ *National Service (No. 2) Act*, 1941, Ch. 4.

¹⁹ Broad, *Conscription in Britain*, 137; Crang, “Come into the Army, Maud,” 387.

²⁰ “Women’s Call-Up Rules Tightened,” *Leven Mail*, 3 Sept. 1941, 3; “100,000 Women Wanted,” *Lincolnshire Standard*, 6 Sept. 1941, 8; “Volunteer Now,” *Londonderry Sentinel*, 2 Feb. 1943, 1; “What They Do and What They Wear,” *Daily Mirror*, 30 Apr. 1943, 2; *Belfast News-Letter*, 4 June 1943, 6.

²¹ “Women’s Services,” *The Scotsman*, 28 Sept. 1942, 5.

²² “Women in Uniform,” *Britannia and Eve*, 1 June 1940, 68; “Watching the W.A.A.F.’s,” *Larne Times*, 2 Aug. 1941, 6; “Service Women To Have Police,” *Daily Mirror*, 15 Sept. 1941, 1; Yarnham, “Britain’s Women Soldiers,” *Britannia and Eve*, 1 June 1942, 18, 70; Stone, “Creating a (Gendered?) Military Identity,” 617.

published more and more articles about the need for servicewomen to leave the service and build a family, to be submissive wives for their husbands.²³ Despite the fact that British media contained a large amount of information about the specifics of women's military service, they presented servicewomen rather as assistants to the "real defenders" of the country—that is, men. In contrast, in the USSR, the media discourse on women in military service was characterized by strict censorship, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Soviet media rarely mentioned the real scale of presence and wide range of roles of women in the military. Statements about male defenders of the Fatherland dominated media discourse, and in most of the articles, women were depicted as victims of the enemy or workers who temporarily replaced men in hard work at the rear. Indeed, early in the war, the Soviet authorities actively tried to refute information about the presence of women in the army, even though the first small-scale mobilizations of them began in 1941.²⁴ Throughout the war, censors paid special attention to materials that reported on the activities of Soviet servicewomen, as the authorities generally did not intend to reveal the significant scale of this phenomenon, and orders to mobilize women were classified and prohibited from being disseminated in the media. For example, a report on the withdrawal of materials by censors in 1942 indicates that thirteen articles on the mobilization of women into the Red Army were withdrawn from the press.²⁵

Furthermore, the report for 10 June to 15 August 1943 noted that the film *Presentation of the Guards Banner to the Pilots* was prohibited for broadcast because "all three squadrons of the regiment consist of women."²⁶ It was almost impossible to find materials in the USSR periodicals that would provide even close to realistic statistics on the number of women in the military, the range of positions, both combat and noncombat, they held in the armed forces, and so forth. Such information was presented sporadically and relatively infrequently, and the most common articles in newspapers were those that covered the activities of individual heroines. These materials helped to maintain the image of Soviet women in the military as an exception to the rule, evidence of special patriotism and love for the Motherland, and a means of shaming men.²⁷

²³ "Homes for Husbands," *Shepton Mallet Journal*, 6 July 1945, 2; Zaliotok, *Zhinky na vijs'kovij sluzhbi*, 231–263.

²⁴ "Boevye podругi," *Pravda*, 4 Aug. 1941, 1; "Na ocherednoj press-konferencii," *Vechernjaja Moskva*, 8 July 1941, 3; *Velikaia Otechestvennaia bez grifa sekretnosti*, 38.

²⁵ Svedenija ob izjatijah cenzury," in *Sovetskaja propaganda*, eds. Livshyn and Orlov, 193.

²⁶ "Iz svodki izjatij cenzury," in *Sovetskaja propaganda*, 656.

²⁷ Zaliotok, *Zhinky na vijs'kovij sluzhbi*, 177–212, 264–294.

The most frequent references in the media to Soviet servicewomen as a relatively large group were made on the eve of International Women's Day, which was a kind of "sacred date" in the USSR during the German-Soviet War. Newspaper articles giving a more or less wide if not complete list of positions in which Soviet women served in the military were timed to this date. The primary target audience for these texts were women. Similarly, on the eve of this holiday, a place for servicewomen appeared in the Resolutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU(b) on International Communist Women's Day, which were widely published by Soviet media.²⁸ However, even in these resolutions, the focus was predominantly on women's roles at the rear, with some even arguing that women primarily inspired their men's exploits and supported the front during the war.²⁹ Throughout the rest of the year, references to servicewomen as a large group in the military were rather scarce in texts aimed at a general audience. Even in similar documents issued by the Central Committee of the CPSU(b) on the eve of other holidays such as the Great October Socialist Revolution, the establishment of the Red Army, and First of May, women were mostly depicted in their "traditional" roles, with service in the regular army rarely mentioned (except for positions related to medicine).³⁰

Demobilization and Resocialization

When it became clear to the Allies that the war would soon end in their favor, they gradually began to prepare for demobilization. Women in both Great Britain and the USSR were among the categories of people subject to demobilization earlier than the majority of military personnel. Thus, in 1944, before demobilization, the British command began to gradually transfer those women who performed operational tasks to clerical or service positions, and quite often the women were unhappy with this.³¹ At the same time, the British authorities planned a campaign to resocialize demobilized women and promised to support them in finding employment. Those who returned to

²⁸ © Zalietok, "Vysvittleniia prysutnosti zhinok," 55–63; "O mezhdunarodnom kommunisticheskom zhenskom dne," *Krasnyj flot*, 7 Mar. 1942, 1; 5 Mar. 1943, 1; *Komsomol'skaja Pravda*, 5 Mar. 1944, 1.

²⁹ "O mezhdunarodnom kommunisticheskom zhenskom dne," *Komsomol'skaja Pravda*, 5 Mar. 1944, 1.

³⁰ "Lozungi CK VKP (b)," *Vechernijaja Moskva*, 31 Oct. 1941, 1; 28 Oct. 1942, 1; *Stalinskij sokol*, 23 Feb. 1943, 2; *Vechernijaja Moskva*, 21 Feb. 1944, 1; 27 Apr. 1944, 1; 31 Oct. 1944, 1; Zalietok, *Zhinky na vijs'kovij sluzhbi*, 177–212, 264–294.

³¹ Fieseler, Hampf, and Schwarzkopf, "Gendering Combat," 123; Elizabeth Mahan, oral history, IWM, cat. no. 28356, reel 4.

their pre-war jobs were promised they would keep their jobs for twelve months. In addition, they announced assistance in finding a job (for the unemployed), obtaining a university education, retraining, financial assistance for building their own home, and so forth.³²

Demobilized British women complained that the government had taught them how to behave during the war, but did not care about their activities in peacetime. After all, many women joined the army right out of school and did not have time to learn any profession. The lack of measures to resocialize women veterans led to depression in some of them.³³ Servicewomen had lower salaries than servicemen during their service, and female veterans were paid less generous pensions than male veterans.³⁴ The British government decided to exempt married women from national service first (before unmarried women and those who held positions in areas of high “national importance”). This was explained by the need to rebuild family life in the country first of all, and only then other spheres. Of course, this duty was assigned to women. It is also noteworthy that women veterans pointed to the fact that the lectures before demobilization emphasized the need to start a family and be good housewives, rather than the many other opportunities that awaited them in civilian life.³⁵ In the postwar years, British military women did not receive adequate recognition for their military service. As a former member of the ATS noted: “You could say that the forgotten army was not the one in Burma, but the one in skirts.”³⁶

Demobilization from the Red Army took place in six stages. First of all, the USSR Law of 23 July 1945 “On the Demobilization of Older Age Groups of the Personnel of the Active Army” was issued.³⁷ Despite the fact that it primarily provided for demobilization on the basis of age, not gender, and was aimed at the speedy release of older men from the army, women were also demobilized in some branches of the army under this law.³⁸ However, the majority of women were demobilized in the second stage, at the end of 1945.³⁹ Subsequent demobilizations lasted from 1946 to 1948 and were based primarily on age. They also included

³² AIR 54, *Women's Auxiliary Air Force*, TNA (UK), AIR 54/135/05, 21–25.

³³ Saywell, *Women in War*, 34–35.

³⁴ Mahan, oral history, IWM, cat. no. 28356, reel 4.

³⁵ Noakes, *Women in the British Army*, 139–141.

³⁶ Saywell, *Women in War*, 2.

³⁷ *Zakon SSSR*, 23 June 1945.

³⁸ *Postanovlenie GKO SSSR No. 9955*, RGASPI, fond 644, opis 2, delo 535, 188–189.

³⁹ *Ukaz Prezidiuma Verhovnogo Soveta SSSR*, 25 September 1945

women who, for one reason or another, were not demobilized in 1945. Almost immediately after the end of the war, women veterans disappeared from official discourse.⁴⁰ These women veterans went through several difficult decades, which for many of them were marked by harassment and accusations of promiscuity during their military service. Because of this, many women veterans concealed the fact of their service and military awards.⁴¹ It was only under Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982) that the state finally officially included women veterans in the public discourse on the occasion of honoring the memory of the heroes of the German-Soviet war.⁴²

As we can see, Great Britain and the USSR used very similar approaches to organizing women's military service and involving women in the defense of the homeland during World War II. These states had no intention of abandoning established gender hierarchies in society and revising the foundations of the armed forces to integrate women into them as permanent full-fledged military personnel with a wide range of available positions. This wartime approach, aimed solely at situational and temporary "patching holes" in the needs of the armed forces with the use of the female population, did not provide servicewomen with the opportunity to develop their military careers, social security equal to that of men, or recognition and glory as defenders of the homeland. In fact, British and Soviet servicewomen and female veterans had a marginalized status even among the majority of women who had no experience of military service and often associated it with the loss of femininity and promiscuity.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Great Britain and the USSR during World War II offer vivid examples of how a state can mobilize women during a war because of a lack of male resources to meet the needs of the army, but at the same time avoid radical changes to gender roles in society. Many scholars point to the significant impact of World War II for women's empowerment in general,⁴³ but, at the same time, research demonstrates that the status of women in the military remained and remains marginal. This observation applies even to countries such as Germany, Great Britain and the US,⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Fieseler, Hampf, and Schwarzkopf, "Gendering Combat," 123.

⁴¹ Fieseler, Hampf, and Schwarzkopf, "Gendering Combat," 123.

⁴² Budnickij, "Muzhchiny i zhenshhiny v Krasnoj Armii," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 52, no. 2/3 (2011): 405–422.

⁴³ Scott, "Women and War," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1984): 2–6.

⁴⁴ Reimer, "Die Kriegerinnen," *Das Parlament*, no. 34–35 (2018); Georgetown Institute,

despite their implementation of measures to promote greater gender equality in the military.

The practice of recruiting women into the army to temporarily cover the rapidly growing wartime personnel needs, which is still found in modern defensive wars, without creating for them de jure and de facto equal conditions of service and career development with men, recognition from the state and society, equal pay and social security benefits, provision of suitable uniforms and hygiene items, medical care, and so forth, along with the attempts to adapt gender hierarchies to the military environment instead of moving away from them, will result in female veterans finding themselves in the same disadvantaged position as their predecessors who participated in World War II.

An approach in which, in the event of war, mobilization in the armed forces is focused primarily on the most motivated citizens without gender distinction seems more effective than the forced and total conscription of the male population. However, this requires, first and foremost, political will and a move away from outdated socio-cultural beliefs that often formed the basis of wartime propaganda in previous armed conflicts. One of them is the dichotomy of a “male defender” and a “female victim.” Civilian men can be victims, and they are also subjected to violence and rape during war. Men are also refugees, and they also perform auxiliary roles during the war. That is why such constructs as “male defender” and a “female victim” devalue the contribution of women to the defense of the country in many roles, including combat.

Essential for this shift to occur is the development of effective and differentiated principles of involving the population in the defense of the state, where, in particular, gendered division of responsibilities should be replaced by the principle that every member of society contributes to the defense of the country according to their physical and mental capabilities and abilities. In this context, the development of the feminist discussion around the essence of militarism and militarization and the move away from the dominance of Western-centric theories that tend to oversimplify these concepts and limit them to the means of strengthening the patriarchy are also urgent. Weronika Grzebalska has drawn attention to these issues within this forum. And I agree with her that we need to pay more attention to the experiences of Central (and Eastern) Europe in the attempt to reconsider these concepts. For some peoples of this region, due to their geographical location and the

“Culture, Gender, and Women in the Military,” <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/...>; House of Commons, *Protecting Those Who Protect Us*, 2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/...>

presence of neighbors pursuing aggressive foreign policies, militarization is directly related to the issue of their survival and preservation of statehood. In these circumstances, the calls from some feminists to resist militarization and label it as a patriarchal invention that contradicts feminist values do not seem constructive.

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