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Women, Patriotism, and Soldiering in Russia's  
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## “My Death for the Motherland Is Happiness”: Women, Patriotism, and Soldiering in Russia’s Great War, 1914–1917

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MELISSA K. STOCKDALE

ON JUNE 21, 1917, THE CITIZENS OF REVOLUTIONARY PETROGRAD witnessed a solemn public ceremony unique in modern history, the consecration of the standards of a battalion of women soldiers being sent as combatants to the front. Thousands flocked to watch the 300 women—their hair close-cropped, wearing regular army-issue trousers and boots, rifles gleaming—march from their barracks to the great St. Isaac’s Cathedral. (See Figure 1.) Among the military and civilian notables waiting to greet the women were generals Lavr Kornilov and P. A. Polovtsev, Duma president Mikhail Rodzianko, and leaders of various political parties. Two bishops and twelve priests officiated, as the battalion was presented with two icons—gifts of the soldiers of the First and Third Armies—and a banner sent by Minister of War Alexander Kerensky. Afterwards, enthusiastic soldiers and sailors lifted commander Maria Bochkareva onto their shoulders, crowds cheered, and orators mounted improvised tribunes to hail the battalion and its head. To the strains of the Marseillaise, the battalion then marched to Mars Field, to honor the graves of those who had fallen in the first days of the February Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

The singularity of this event lay not so much in the appearance of women soldiers armed for combat, for individual women in Russia had been fighting as regular soldiers, with and without formal approval, since the very start of the war. Moreover, there had been instances of women in other times and places fighting alongside men in extraordinary circumstances, often as partisans or in civil wars.<sup>2</sup>

One of the greatest pleasures of scholarship is being part of a scholarly community: many individuals and institutions in that community have contributed to the writing of this article. An earlier version was presented at the annual national convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, St. Louis (November 1999), and it has profited from audience suggestions. I have been enormously helped by Cathy A. Frierson, Sandie Holguin, Catherine Kelly, Laurie Burnham, Judith Lewis, and the anonymous readers of the *AHR*, for their close readings of various drafts, as well as by long conversations in Moscow with Eric Lohr on the subject of World War I Russia. Joshua Sanborn and Elise K. Wirtschafter answered questions on the workings of the Russian military; William Allison and Slava Katamidze provided help on photos. I am especially grateful to Pavel Shcherbinin for his generosity in sharing numerous sources. My research and writing have been supported by the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, the Fulbright-Hayes Faculty Research Abroad Program, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Research Council of the University of Oklahoma.

<sup>1</sup> Descriptions come from Bessie Beatty, *The Red Heart of Russia* (New York, 1919), 94–95; Maria Botchkareva [sic], *Yashka, My Life as Peasant, Officer and Exile*, as set down by Isaac Don Levine (New York, 1919), 189–92; Nina Krylova in Boris Solonevich, *Zhenshchina s vintovkoi: Istoricheski roman* (Buenos Aires, 1955), 84–87; and *Rech’* (June 22, 1917): 4.

<sup>2</sup> There is a diffuse and uneven literature on the history of women as fighters and in the military.

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