

# THE 'NIGHT WITCHES':

## Soviet women pilots



Marina Raskova

The Second World War was the largest military conflict in history. The rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany in the late 1930s brought unimaginable suffering to millions of people. Hitler was defeated in 1945 but, without

doubt, Russia and the whole of the Soviet Union paid the highest price for the victory. Developments in military technology, like the world-famous Katyusha rocket launcher and Shturmovik bomber, were important. But without the extraordinary courage, determination and endurance of Soviet people, the victory would hardly have been possible.

The Soviet Union was the only country in the world where women not only took care of fields and factories but also fought shoulder to shoulder with men as front line soldiers. It was also the only country where women could become fighter pilots. In 1941, when Germany invaded



Natalya Meklin



Lilya Litvyak, Katya Budanova, Mariya Kuznetsova

the Soviet Union, Major Marina Raskova, a famous Soviet pilot, went to Stalin to convince him to set up three women's fighter and bomber regiments. Stalin agreed and a special training centre for women was set up in Engels, a small town not far from Stalingrad.

All the girls were volunteers and most of them were about 20 years old. Some of them, like Marina Raskova, had been pilots before the war, but many had to learn from scratch. However, in a few months, the women were taught what it takes most men four years to learn.

The girls often flew old Po-2 planes known as 'kukuruzniks' and men pilots often laughed at them.

"Our planes were the slowest in the air force. They often came back riddled with bullets, but

rise [raɪz] эд. приход к власти  
Nazi ['nɑ:tsɪ] нацистский  
to defeat [dɪ'fi:t] разбить, одержать победу  
rocket launcher [ˌrɒkɪt 'lɔ:ntʃə] ракетно-пусковая установка  
extraordinary [ɪk'strɔ:dnən] необычайный, удивительный  
determination [dɪ,tɜ:mɪ'neɪʃn] решительность, решимость  
endurance [ɪn'dʒʊərəns] стойкость, выносливость

to invade [ɪn'veɪd] вторгаться, нападать, оккупировать  
major ['meɪdʒə] майор  
to convince [kən'vɪns] убеждать  
to set up [set ʌp] организовывать, открывать  
bomber [ˈbɒmə] бомбардировщик  
regiment ['redʒɪmənt] полк  
volunteer [ˌvɒləntiə] доброволец  
from scratch [skrætʃ] с самого начала, с нуля  
riddled with bullets ['rɪdlɪd wɪð 'bʊlɪts]

изрешеченный пулями  
to recall [rɪ'kɔ:l] вспоминать  
tough [tʌf] трудный, тяжелый  
to rip off [rɪp ɒf] сдирать  
to take off [teɪk ɒf] взлетать  
to land [lænd] приземляться  
aircraft ['eəkrɑ:ft] авиация, самолеты  
experienced [ɪk'spɪəriənst] опытный  
mission ['mɪʃn] боевой вылет  
complicated [ˌkɒmplɪkeɪtɪd] трудный, сложный



Katya Ryabova and  
Nadya Popova

they kept flying," recalled one of the girls.

The girls' regiments fought at Stalingrad in the winter of 1942-43 and in every battle including the Battle for Berlin in 1945.

Being a fighter pilot was a tough job. Ground temperatures ranged from 40°C in summer and -50°C in winter. Some parts of the aircraft were so cold that they ripped the skin off if you touched them. All the women were excellent skiers and many learnt to take off and land their aircraft on ice and snow.

As the women pilots became more experienced, their missions became more complicated. It was the women's regiments that learnt to fly at night with their engines switched off and attack the enemy unexpectedly. The Germans feared them and called them the 'night witches'.

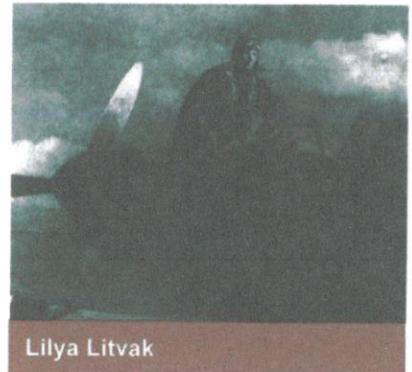
Maria Smirnova, one of the 'night witches' of the 588th Bomber Regiment, flew 3,260 missions – that is about two missions for every day of the war! One day in 1944, her squadron, led by 19-year-old Nadya Popova, flew 18 missions. But the girls didn't think of themselves as heroes or as something special, they were just doing what they felt was needed to bring victory a bit closer.

Years after the war, Nadya Popova said, "At night sometimes, I look up into the dark sky, close my eyes and picture myself as a girl at the controls of my bomber and I think, 'Nadya, how on earth did you do it?'"

However, the death rate for pilots was very high. Serafima Tamsova-Teranenko, a former fighter pilot, recollected:

"To fly a combat mission is not a trip under the moon. Every attack, every bombing is a dance with death."

The regiments' highest-scoring ace, Lilya Litvak was awarded a Gold Star of a Hero of the Soviet Union and nicknamed the White Rose of Stalingrad for her courage and skills as a fighter pilot. She once shot down an experienced Knight's Cross German ace (20 kills). When the German pilot realised that he had been hit by what he thought was a 'schoolgirl', he tore off his decorations and threw them out of the cockpit. Lilya was only 21 but she had already shot down 10 enemy planes. She was so short that she couldn't reach the pedals in her plane when she first started flying. Her mechanic, also a woman, had to adjust them for her. Nobody knows exactly how she died but, according to witnesses, Lilya was last seen being chased by eight (!) enemy aircraft.



Lilya Litvak

After the war, the three women's regiments were broken up. Some of the former 'night witches' carried on flying civilian aircraft for airlines such as Aeroflot, while others went back to more ordinary professions. Every year there are fewer and fewer of them left to tell their story. People say that without the past, there can't be any future, so it is important to remember and appreciate what those amazing women did for us.

engine ['endʒɪn] двигатель  
switched off выключенный  
squadron ['skwɒdrən] эскадрилья  
How on earth did you do it? Как же тебе это удавалось?  
death rate смертность  
to recollect [ˌreke'lekt] вспоминать  
combat mission [ˌkɒmbæt 'mɪʃn] боевой вылет  
highest-scoring результативный  
ace [eis] ас

to nickname ['nɪkneɪm] давать прозвище, называть  
to shoot (shot) down сбивать (самолет)  
Knight's Cross [ˌnaɪts 'krɒs] кавалер Ордена Железного Креста  
kill сбитый самолет  
decorations 3д. ордена и медали  
cockpit ['kɒkprɪt] открытая кабина, кокпит  
mechanic [mɪ'kæni:k] механик  
to adjust [ə'dʒʌst] приспособлять, прилаживать

witness ['wɪtnɪs] свидетель, очевидец  
to chase [tʃeɪs] гнаться, преследовать  
to break up распускать, расформировывать  
civilian [sɪ'vɪliən] гражданский  
to appreciate [ə'prɪ:ʃieɪt] быть признательным, благодарным, ценить

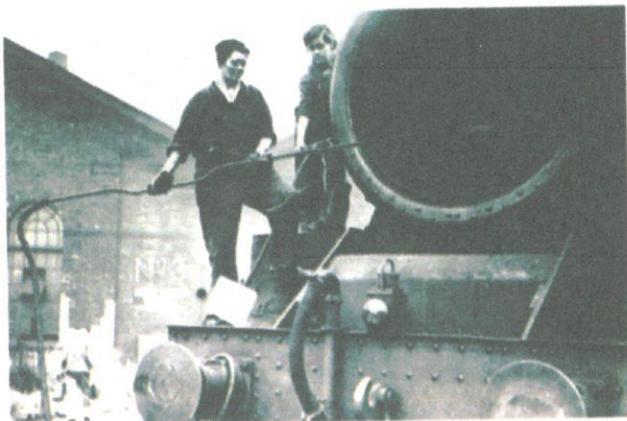
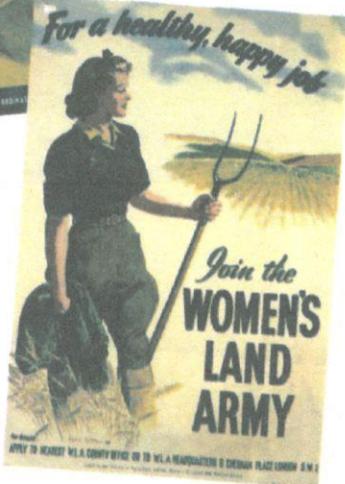
Partly due to their efforts during the war British women finally were allowed to vote in elections after 1918. They had helped defeat Germany and saved Britain. What would their role be in the next World War?

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR



In 1939 Britain declared war on Fascist Germany after Hitler had invaded Poland. Soon Britain stood alone in Europe against the Nazis. Women once again were needed to save Britain. As in the First World War

women were called upon to work in all areas of the so-called 'Home Front'. Because Britain was an island surrounded by German troops and ships there



was a real risk of blockade and starvation. Many women worked hard as 'Land Girls' doing heavy physical work in agriculture.



Vera Atkins

One new area of female activity in war was in espionage. The Special Operations Executive used many women as secret agents. One of these women was Vera Atkins. Her job was to create 'cover-stories' for the spies sent into occupied Europe. She sent 39 women spies into

enemy territory and also spent a year interrogating German officers after the war.

Many women special agents worked as radio operators in France, decoding messages sent by the British to help the French Resistance movement. This was very dangerous work indeed as the chances of being caught were very high. They parachuted into the country at night, quickly moving from place to place to avoid detection. They transported messages around the country and helped supply the Resistance with weapons and ammunition, which was being dropped by the Royal Air Force.



Nancy Wake

One woman, Nancy Wake, from New Zealand, even led a raid on the German Secret Police. One of her male comrades said:

"She is the most feminine woman I know, until the fighting starts. Then she is like five men."

Another woman spy, Christine Granville, who was born in Poland, collected information on troop movements and helped Churchill cor-

to declare [di'kleə] war (on) объявить войну  
to invade [in'veid] захватывать, оккупировать  
Nazi ['nɑ:tsi] нацистский, фашистский  
to call upon обращаться к, призывать  
blockade [blɔ:'keid] блокада  
starvation [stɑ:'veɪʃn] голод, голодная смерть  
agriculture ['ægrɪ,kʌltʃə] сельское хозяйство  
female ['fi:meɪl] женский  
espionage ['espiə:nə:ʒ] шпионаж

Special Operations Executive [ig'zekjʊtɪv] Служба секретных операций («секретная армия Черчилля»)  
secret agent [si:'kri:t 'eɪdʒənt] секретный агент  
cover-story легенда (у разведчиков)  
spy [spaɪ] шпион, разведчик, тайный агент  
to interrogate [in'terigeɪt] допрашивать  
to decode [di:'kəʊd] расшифровывать  
Resistance [ri'zɪstəns] Сопротивление, движение Сопротивления

to parachute [ˈpærəʊtɪt] спускаться с парашютом  
to avoid detection [ə'vɔɪd dɪ'tekʃn] избежать обнаружения, разоблачения  
to supply [sə'plaɪ] with снабжать, поставлять  
ammunition [æmju'nɪʃn] боеприпасы  
Royal Air Force Королевские военно-воздушные силы (ВВС Великобритании)  
male [meɪl] мужчина, мужского пола  
feminine [ˈfemɪnɪn] женственный



Christine Granville

rectly predict the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany.

Noor Inayat Khan was born in Moscow in 1915. During the war she worked as a British spy in France, staying in the country even when she knew that the Germans would eventually arrest her. When she was arrested she gave no information to the

Germans. However they were able to break the code in the book she was carrying. After this they could understand the messages London was sending to France and more British spies were caught. Like many women spies, the Germans murdered her. In 1949 she was posthumously awarded the George Cross for bravery.

Women made many other contributions to the British war effort, in fire fighting, journalism, and operating anti-aircraft guns. They also led the way in criticising the way the war was being fought: some women journalists argued that the mass destruction of German cities by bombers was morally wrong.



Noor Inayat Khan

## WOMEN IN THE ARMED SERVICES SINCE THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Recently women have been able to join the army, navy and air force. Unlike in America though, they are still not allowed to fight alongside men. A government report in 2002 said that if women were allowed to fight then the 'combat effectiveness' of the army would be less.

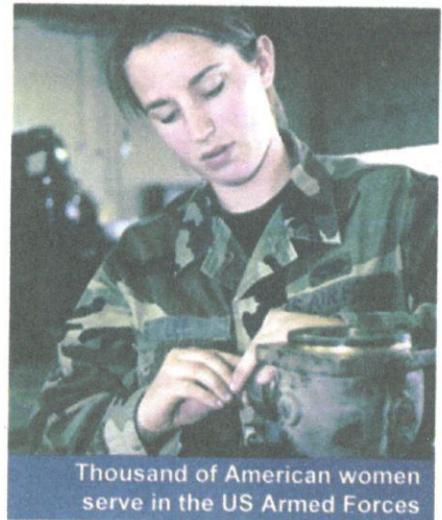
No one really understands what this means. Some people think that if women fought along-



British women in the army

side men, then the men would worry too much about the women, and so put themselves in danger. The report gave lots of reasons why women should not fight. Many of the reasons were about physical and psychological differences between men and women.

What is interesting is that women in America have fought for years next to men on the front line. In Iraq and Panama they showed everyone that they were very brave and often better at fighting than the men.



Thousand of American women serve in the US Armed Forces

However, the British army is different from the American army in an important way. British soldiers are still trained to kill the enemy with hand-to-hand weapons. This means face-to-face, with 'cold steel'. Many people still believe that this kind of fighting would be very difficult for women.

Jeremy Moor

**troop movement** передвижение войск  
**to predict** [prɪ'dɪkt] предсказывать, прогнозировать  
**eventually** [ɪ'ventʃuəli] в конце концов  
**to break the code** разгадать шифр  
**posthumously** [ˌpɒstjʊməsi] посмертно  
**George Cross** Георгиевский крест (военный орден, которым награждаются гражданские лица, совершившие подвиги во время войны)  
**contribution** [ˌkɒntrɪ'bjuːʃn] вклад

**fire fighting** тушение пожаров  
**anti-aircraft** [æntɪ'eɪkrɑ:ft] **gun** зенитное орудие  
**to lead the way** идти впереди, показывать пример  
**to argue** [ˈɑ:gju:] спорить, утверждать, доказывать  
**mass destruction** [ˌmæs drɪ'strʌkʃn] массовое уничтожение  
**bomber** ['bɒmə] бомбардировщик  
**navy** ['neɪvɪ] военно-морской флот

**effectiveness** [ɪ'fektɪvnis] эффективность, результативность, производительность  
**alongside** [ə'lɔŋ'saɪd] бок о бок, вместе с  
**psychological** [ˌsaɪkə'lɒdʒɪkəl] психологический  
**hand-to-hand** рукопашный  
**cold steel** холодное оружие