

For Uncle Sam and Mother Russia: WASPs and Soviet Airwomen Finding their Wings,
Friendship and Love during World War II

Diandra D'Alessio
Student ID: 6293964

HIST 693/3
Prof. A. Rowley
August 12, 2015

“I don’t want to hide anything; I want to say we experienced many feelings and emotions – fear, joy, love, sorrow – as we faced very hard experiences. Sometimes when we successfully completed a mission we even sang and danced there at the airfield because life is life, and we were young.”

- Senior Lieutenant Zoya Parfyonova¹

“I believe history is going to prove that we did a tremendous service. First, because we did step in and help the country when it was necessary. Just as a bunch of the women did who went into the other services, and into factory work and so on. We did our part for the war effort. Also, I think we opened the eyes of a lot of people to the fact that women were capable of doing things! I feel we were the forerunners for the women who are in the Air Force today. [...] I’m not sure I could do what they have to do these days, but maybe we did open some doors – and, selfishly, I had a great time. To me, it was one of the best times of my life.”

- WASP Fran Smith²

The harsh social, political, economic and military realities of the Second World War necessitated unprecedented amounts of human and material resources. Countries involved in the war, be they Axis or Allied powers, mobilized scores of men and women on the domestic and military fronts, but perhaps none as much as the Soviet Union. The only country in World War II to have both men and women in military combat roles, an estimated one million Soviet women took up arms to defend their cherished motherland.³ Over one thousand women served in the Red Air Force, where they excelled as pilots, navigators, dive-bombers, and other roles in military aviation, consequently earning countless honors and decorations.⁴ They were also prolific fliers; the night-bomber regiment alone flew over 24,000 sorties during the war.⁵ Many Soviet airwomen were fortunate and valiant enough to receive the most prestigious award of them all, the golden

¹ Anne Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1994), 71.

² Jean Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 139.

³ Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona. *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

⁴ Amy Goodpaster Strebe, *Flying For Her Country: The American and Soviet Women Military Pilots of World War II* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 2.

⁵ Markwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, 97.

star medal of the Hero of the Soviet Union, while serving in regiments that were either mixed or exclusively female; out of the three all-female regiments formed upon the country's wartime debut in 1941, two would integrate male pilots by the end of the war.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union's American allies also demonstrated aerial prowess in both the European and Pacific theatres, although combat roles were exclusively the domain of male pilots. However, a veritable pilot project from 1942 to 1944 not only trained women to become pilots, but also tried to militarize them. This was known as the WASP (Women's Auxiliary Service Pilots) program, and nearly 1,100 graduates ferried planes across America, tested airplanes, and flew as practice for tow-targets during its run.⁶

The nature of warfare was fundamentally different for these women. War with the Germans meant that Soviet pilots had to be on the front lines of combat and faced the enemy head on. As a result, many of them were killed in combat, a few were taken as prisoners of war, and more generally, all had to face the fact that their country was under direct attack. Meanwhile, half a world away, the WASPs fought very hard for militarization, even taking their cause to Congress, only to never leave North America. I argue that despite their fundamentally different military experiences, Soviet and American female pilots during World War II shared many social and everyday experiences, as we shall see in their letters, memoirs and biographies. These commonalities are particularly evident in their reasons for flying in the first place, the friendships they formed while on duty, and their romantic experiences with their male equivalents.

⁶ Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1.

Before delving into these subjects further, I will first consider the extant primary and secondary literature on Soviet and American women pilots. More specifically, my primary sources are memoirs, letters, and biographies of the female pilots, while the secondary literature consists of works from mostly Western authors.

There is a vast literature on the history of the WASPs, and the scholarship is relatively recent. Among the first works was Sally Van Wagenen Keil's seminal monograph published in 1979. *Those Wonderful Women in their Flying Machines* is a general history of the program, and while they are seldom directly quoted, Keil interviewed several surviving WASPs and structures her narrative accordingly, while also providing a more top-down, institutional history of the program.⁷ Keil felt compelled to write the book in honor of her late aunt, a former WASP, and also because very few people had heard of the WASPs at the time; Keil wanted their stories to be heard.⁸

Former WASP Anne Noggle published *For God, Country, and the Thrill of It: Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II* in 1990.⁹ A largely pictorial work, it also features a brief history of the WASP program. Another former WASP, Jean Hascall Cole, published *Women Pilots of World War II* two years later. Her book's narrative structure is similar to Keil's, although in this case the WASPs interviewed are directly quoted, and come from her own graduating class (44-W-2) – therefore, it is slightly more of a microhistory rather than a more sweeping look at the WASPs, although the book is still very illustrative of the women's everyday experiences in training and on the job.¹⁰

⁷ Sally Van Wagenen Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines: The Unknown Heroines of World War II* (New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, 1979.)

⁸ *Ibid.*, ix-x.

⁹ See Anne Noggle, *For God, Country, and the Thrill of It: Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II: Photographic Portraits and Text* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1990.)

¹⁰ Jean Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992.)

Conversely, Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith's *We're in This War Too* takes a more comprehensive look at American women's roles during the war, and a WASP's letters are among those featured in this book. The use of over 30,000 letters is remarkable because as the authors note, until then, women's letters had largely not been the focus of historical scholarship.¹¹ Furthermore, everyday women, not well-known women involved in World War II, wrote the letters, giving the study a more socio-historical edge.

Molly Merryman's 1998 monograph, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II*, is arguably the most intricate study of the WASPs to date, although it is overwhelmingly an institutional one. Seldom do we hear the WASPs' actual voices; instead, Merryman takes us through the program's formation, the many responses to the program in contemporary media, and the congressional hearings that led to its collapse.¹² Similarly, former WASP Yvonne C. Pateman's book chapter released that year is also a more institutional history of the WASPs, and those voices featured are mostly those in authority positions (e.g. WASP founder Jacqueline Cochran.)¹³

Meanwhile, journalist Emily Yellin's 2004 study focuses on American women at large during the Second World War, from homemakers to factory workers, and she also has a section on the WASPs. This section, like Pateman and Merryman's works, has

¹¹ Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, eds., *We're in This War, Too: World War II Letters from American Women in Uniform* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.), 3-4.

¹² Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 1998.)

¹³ Yvonne C. Pateman, "Women Airforce Service Pilots: WASP," in Holm and Bellafaire, eds., *In Defense of a Nation: Servicewomen in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Military Women's Press, 1998.)

some institutional history (e.g. letters from Cochran), but also goes one step further and features letters and testimonies from the pilots themselves.¹⁴

Comparative studies on the WASPs began appearing a few years later. Helena Schrader's 2006 article compares the WASPs and their British counterparts in the ATA (Air Transport Auxiliary), and is mostly top-down in its analysis.¹⁵ More relevant to this paper, Amy Goodpaster Strebe's 2007 monograph is a comparative study of the WASPs and Soviet women pilots during the Second World War, and it is simultaneously an institutional history while also featuring WASPs and Soviet pilots' reflections on their experiences in their own words.¹⁶ Finally, Lois K. Merry's comparative study, published in 2011, looks at American, British, Russian and German female pilots during the Second World War in two parts; Part I deals with the formation of women's aviation units in the United States and the Soviet Union, whereas Part II provides biographies of select airwomen.¹⁷

Apart from primary sources that appear in the abovementioned secondary sources, this study will also refer to a few memoirs published after the war. The earliest is from Jacqueline Cochran, whose *The Stars at Noon* was first published in 1954. She spends only one chapter on her time as the head of the WASP program, but comprehensively discusses its formation and collapse by 1944.¹⁸ Over fifty years later, former WASP Marion Stegeman Hodgson published her memoir, recounting her

¹⁴ Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004.)

¹⁵ Helena P. Schrader, "Winged Auxiliaries: Women Pilots in the UK and US During World War Two," *The Journal of Navigation* 59, no. 2 (2006): 187-199.

¹⁶ Amy Goodpaster Strebe, *Flying For Her Country: The American and Soviet Women Military Pilots of World War II* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007.)

¹⁷ Lois K. Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II: A History with Biographies of American, British, Russian and German Aviators* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011.)

¹⁸ Jacqueline Cochran, *The Stars at Noon* (Boston; Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1954.)

fulfilling time at Avenger Field with her fellow WASPs as well as her courtship and eventual marriage to pilot Ned Hodgson.¹⁹ Finally, former WASP Ann Baumgartner Carl's 1999 memoir traces her love of planes from her childhood to her time as a WASP and as the first female test pilot of an American fighter jet, as well as finding her husband while serving her country.²⁰

Literature on the Soviet regiments of female pilots has only recently proliferated in Western historiography. The abovementioned veteran WASP Anne Noggle also took an interest in her Soviet counterparts, and interviewed several of them for her 1994 monograph, *A Dance with Death*. Although more on the popular than the scholarly side, the work features lengthy interviews in the pilots' own words as well as a series of contemporary portraits taken by Noggle.²¹

Perhaps the most comprehensive and influential study on Soviet women pilots is that of American military historian and former Air Force pilot Reina Pennington. Her 2001 monograph, *Wings, Women and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*, briefly considers prewar achievements in Soviet aviation before delving into the formation, accomplishments, and eventual demobilization of the three (originally) all-female aviation regiments during World War II.²² A monograph years in the making, it also features numerous archival sources as well as interviews from surviving members of these regiments, such as night bomber Polina Gelman and commander Aleksandr Gridnev.

¹⁹ Marion Stegeman Hodgson, *Winning my Wings: A Woman Airforce Pilot in World War II*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1996.

²⁰ Ann B. Carl, *A WASP among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in WWII* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999.)

²¹ Anne Noggle, *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1994.)

²² Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001.)

Anna Krylova's *Soviet Women in Combat* followed in 2010, and it is more of a cultural history of Soviet women's participation in the military during World War II, since many of her primary sources are Soviet magazines, newspaper articles, and illustrations of combatants.²³ While she discusses other combatants besides pilots (e.g. snipers, machine gunners), Krylova also looks at the formation of the abovementioned all-female regiments and the bonds formed between pilots (eventually male pilots too) and their female or male commanders within these regiments.

Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Cardona's sweeping 2012 monograph, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, considers all sorts of Soviet women in World War II, be they snipers, partisans, and women beyond the historical pale (e.g. war wounded, prisoners of war). It has one chapter specifically devoted women pilots.²⁴ Among other topics, this chapter considers factors that led Soviet women to become pilots, the formation of the all-female units, sexuality at the front, and reactions to the deaths of pilots (especially Marina Raskova's), often while using an extensive primary source base, including diary entries and photographs.

Finally, Bill Yenne's *The White Rose of Stalingrad*, a biography of flying ace Lilia Litvyak, can only be termed a popular history. As a result, it lacks footnotes (and also has some historical inaccuracies), but despite of these shortcomings, one chapter of the book is especially useful to this study in two ways. First, it looks at Litvyak's

²³ Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.)

²⁴ Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona. *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 84-116.

professional and personal friendships with fellow pilot Andrei Solomatin, and second, Yenne cites Litvyak's letters as well as primary sources from those who knew her.²⁵

Several primary sources about and/or from Soviet women pilots exist, and many were published after the USSR's collapse in 1991. Canadian historian Kazimiera J. Cottam put out a series of biographies and other primary sources in a number of volumes, the earliest being *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*. Among other topics, this monograph looks at eminent pilots such as Marina Raskova, Lilia Litvyak, and Klavdiya Fomicheva in biographical sketches.²⁶ Her next two publications, although thirteen years apart, are virtually identical compilations of biographies of women pilots, written by their fellow pilots, and cover anything from frontline friendships to harrowing battle scenes.²⁷ Finally, Cottam's most recent work is a collection of biographies of various Soviet women soldiers. Aside from pilots, she features biographies of snipers, machine gunners, partisans, and medical staff.²⁸

Finally, virtually identical editions of pilot Anna Timofeeva-Egorova's memoirs were published in 2009 and 2010. In her gripping autobiography, Timofeeva-Egorova discusses what motivated her to start flying, her brother's tarnished reputation with the Soviet state, her relationships with male pilots as the only female in her regiment, her

²⁵ Bill Yenne, *The White Rose of Stalingrad: The Real-Life Adventure of Lidiya Vladimirovna Litvyak, the Highest Scoring Female Air Ace of All Time* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2013.)

²⁶ Kazimiera Janina Cottam and Galina Markova, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II* (Manhattan, KS: Military Affairs/Aerospace Historian, 1983.)

²⁷ Kazimiera Janina Cottam, *In the Sky Above the Front: A Collection of Memoirs of Soviet Airwomen Participants in the Great Patriotic War* (Manhattan, KS: MA/AH Publishing, 1984) and Kazimiera Janina Cottam, *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II* (Nepean, ON: New Military Publishing, 1997.)

²⁸ Kazimiera Janina Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers* (Nepean, ON: New Military Publishing, 1998.)

relatively unique situation as a prisoner of war, her eventual marriage and family, and her postwar struggle to obtain decorations due to her stigmatized POW status.²⁹

Given this growing historiography, my contributions to the extant scholarship are threefold. First, I am comparing American and Soviet airwomen pilots during World War II, as Amy Goodpaster Strebe has done in *Flying For Her Country*. However, here the women's own voices take center stage, whereas institutional history will be kept to a minimum. I spend much more time with primary sources than Strebe.³⁰ Second, as we have seen, much of the existing scholarship has top-down analysis (e.g. institutional histories of the WASPs and the Soviet women's regiments). This study, on the other hand, has an approach more in line with social history in that it looks at the women themselves and their relationships to one another. Finally, in Anna Krylova's *Soviet Women in Combat*, she argues along the lines of the Soviet master narrative that relations among Soviet male and female pilots and other combatants were strictly platonic, and more akin to those between brothers and sisters.³¹ In fact, several of the women's memoirs and letters show that American as well as Soviet pilots did find love at the front – a fact that directly contradicts Krylova's argument. Hence, my research challenges her conclusions on love (or lack thereof) at the front. Before moving onto the three key themes at the heart of this study, let us turn to prewar Soviet and American aviation culture.

²⁹ Anna Timofeeva-Egorova, *Red Sky, Black Death: A Soviet Woman Pilot's Memoir of the Eastern Front* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2009), and Anna Timofeeva-Egorova, *Over Fields of Fire: Flying the Sturmovik in Action on the Eastern Front, 1942-45* (Solihull, UK: Helion & Company, 2010.)

³⁰ Strebe, *Flying For Her Country*, 2-3.

³¹ Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 282-283.

Prewar Soviet and American Aviation Culture and their First Wartime Women Pilots

Soviet aviation saw a series of achievements in the 1930s, some of which made international headlines and put the country's aerial prowess on the world stage. Soviet aviation came to the fore in February 1934, when a ship, the *Cheliuskin*, became stuck and was eventually crushed by ice in the Chukchi Sea, leaving its remaining 104 passengers as castaways.³² A committee in charge of their rescue determined that the best course of action would be an aerial rescue, and after nearly thirty unsuccessful tries, a month-long rescue was completed in April 1934.³³ Aside from garnering plenty of domestic and international press coverage, the pilots involved in the affair were given a new award specifically made for the occasion, the Hero of the Soviet Union (HSU) medal. The most prestigious medal a Soviet citizen could receive, it was also awarded to several female pilots during World War II, including some who appear in this study.

After some unsuccessful attempts in 1935, the Soviet Union set out to achieve its biggest feat yet – crossing the North Pole by air. Pilots Valery Chkalov, Alexander Beliakov and Georgiy Baidukov first attempted a transpolar flight in July 1936, but poor weather conditions and low oxygen levels forced them to make an emergency landing fifty-six hours into the flight.³⁴ Although they did not reach their intended destination, the three men became HSUs on July 21, 1936, and received much praise at home and abroad. In June 1937, the same trio finally achieved a transpolar flight from Moscow to Oregon,

³² John McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 64.

³³ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁴ Scott W. Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 224-225, and Georgiy Baidukov, *Russian Lindbergh: The Life of Valery Chkalov* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991): 148-153.

receiving heroes' welcomes in America and back home.³⁵ Furthermore, only weeks later, pilots Mikhail Gromov, Andrei Yumashev and Sergei Danilin flew from Moscow to San Jacinto, California, beating the record set by Chkalov, Beliakov and Baidukov.

1938 saw a unique aviation feat for the Soviet Union – this time, a record-breaking flight involved three female pilots. The *Rodina* (Russian for “motherland”) flight tried “to set [a women’s world] record for straight-line distance [...] from Moscow to Komsomolsk in the Far East.”³⁶ Valentina Grizodubova, already a seasoned pilot, met directly with Stalin and other leaders to plan the flight, and during the war became “the commander of the 101st Long-Range Air Regiment, a bomber-transport unit.”³⁷ Furthermore, she was the only woman in the Red Air Force to be appointed commander of an exclusively male aviation regiment, and as we will see, she assumed a motherly role to her soldiers.³⁸ Polina Osipenko, meanwhile, grew up on a collective farm by the Sea of Azov and later began working in the cafeteria of the Kachinsk Aviation School, persistently asking the head of the school until he admitted her as a student.³⁹ Before the war, Osipenko flew with fighter squadrons and eventually became a flight commander. Unfortunately, Osipenko was never able to defend her country. In May 1939, she and co-pilot Anatoly Serov were killed in a plane crash, and because of her popularity after the *Rodina* flight, the two were given a state funeral with Stalin as one of her pallbearers.

Finally, Marina Raskova was a renowned pilot and navigator in the 1930s, although she originally wanted to be an opera singer. Her hopes were dashed by an ear

³⁵ Jay Bergman, "Valerii Chkalov: Soviet Pilot as New Soviet Man." *Journal of Contemporary History* 33 no. 1 (Jan. 1998): 140, and Baidukov, *Russian Lindbergh*, 244-267.

³⁶ Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14, 70.

³⁸ Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, 5.

³⁹ Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 11.

infection when she was a teenager.⁴⁰ She went on to study chemistry and engineering, eventually becoming a skilled navigator. In 1933, Raskova was “the first woman to qualify as an air force navigator,” and the following year, at only twenty-two years old, she became the first female instructor at the Zhukovskii Air Academy.⁴¹ Most relevant to this study, in October 1941 she helped found three exclusively female air regiments (two of which would later incorporate men): the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, the 587th Day Bomber Aviation Regiment, and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment.

The women left from Moscow on September 24, 1938 on a flight that should have taken about “twenty-five to thirty hours.”⁴² However, there were poor weather conditions and visibility soon after take-off, and a cabin fire forced them to land their plane in the remote Siberian taiga. Raskova, the navigator of the airplane, jumped out of her cockpit and spent ten harrowing days in the taiga without her emergency kit. Grizodubova and Osipenko landed in a swamp, and a massive search ensued. Grizodubova and Osipenko were found with the wrecked plane eight days into the search, and Raskova, having injured her legs, found them the next day.

Although incomplete, the flight set a new record for the “women’s international nonstop broken-line distance” while also beating the straight-line record.⁴³ As a result, Raskova, Osipenko and Grizodubova became the first female Heroes of the Soviet Union and the only ones to receive the gold star medal before the war. Raskova especially received press coverage within the USSR and the West, and her book about the flight inspired countless aspiring female pilots because of her skill and bravery. What’s more,

⁴⁰ Strebe, *Flying for Her Country*, 16.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

while Grizodubova was not particularly interested in working with women pilots, Raskova and Osipenko received letters from women and young girls who dreamed of flying.⁴⁴ Indeed, the three pilots were role models, and many aspiring women pilots, including Lilia Litvyak, kept pictures and hung posters of them in admiration.⁴⁵

The *Rodina* flight also inspired women and young girls to join the paramilitary organization Osoaviakhim, which the Soviet state established in 1927 to train teenaged Soviet boys and girls in anything from chemical warfare and marksmanship to parachuting and flying. Women especially excelled in parachuting, which had both military as well as leisurely applications because it proved to be an enormously popular spectator sport, keeping audiences on their toes as parachutists performed death-defying jumps from airplanes or parachute towers.⁴⁶ Some female parachutists, like Nina Kamneva and Liuba Berlin, were celebrities because of their record-breaking stunts.

However, within Osoaviakhim lay many obstacles for aspiring aviatrixes. Among other issues, the organization struggled financially in the mid-1930s, and female students bore the brunt of hazing from their male classmates as well as sexual harassment from some superiors.⁴⁷ Ultimately, despite these obstacles to completing their training, it is estimated that out of the over 60,000 air club graduates between 1932 and 1940, one out of every six was female.⁴⁸

The Soviets would have to defend their motherland beginning in June 1941, when Hitler's Operation Barbarossa meant that Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Timothy Paynich, "Celebrities or Scapegoats? Women in Prewar Soviet Aviation." *Minerva Journal of Women and War* 2 no. 1 (Spring 2008): 74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

effectively launching the country into World War II. At that time, while there were very few Soviet women serving in military aviation units, there were thousands of women civilian pilots who had graduated from Osoaviakhim and were ready to take up arms against the fascist invaders.

However, even the most experienced women pilots were barred from enlisting, and at first there were no plans to actively mobilize them into the Red Air Force. Marina Raskova, meanwhile, was then a civil defense volunteer and found herself swarmed with letters from enthusiastic women pilots, ready to defend their motherland.⁴⁹ Already held in high esteem by Stalin, Raskova persistently tried to convince him that women should be able to join the Red Air Force.⁵⁰ Although many Kremlin bigwigs thought that combat was not the domain of women, he wholeheartedly supported her cause, and the all-volunteer Aviation Group 122 was born in October 1941.

As mentioned earlier, the three combat regiments formed under Aviation Group 122 were the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, the 587th Day Bomber Aviation Regiment, and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment. They had 745 women pilots among their ranks.⁵¹ The 586th was later absorbed into the 270th bomber division of the 8th Air Army, and in February 1943 the 587th was renamed the 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment, while the 588th was renamed the 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment. The latter regiment was the only one that stayed exclusively female for the remainder of the war, flying over 24,000 combat sorties and obtaining the most decorations out of all three; by 1990, twenty-three members had received the Hero of the

⁴⁹ Strebe, *Flying for Her Country*, 18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II*, 50.

Soviet Union medal.⁵² They were also famously known as the “Night Witches” or *Nachthexen*, a name some German aviators gave to them for their aerial prowess.

When one thinks of prewar aviation in the United States, the names Orville and Wilbur Wright, Charles Lindbergh, and Amelia Earhart are perhaps the first to come to mind, and rightly so, since their exploits captivated contemporary audiences and continue to permeate American popular culture at large. However, when it comes to women’s aviation immediately before and during the Second World War, the names Jacqueline (Jackie) Cochran and Nancy Harkness Love are inextricably linked.

Like Marina Raskova, Jacqueline Cochran did not originally envision a career in aviation. Born into poverty as Bessie Mae Pittman near Muscogee, Florida, she was an orphan and sought to reinvent herself into a successful young woman. In her twenties she moved to New York City, and soon started her own cosmetics business.⁵³ In 1936, the thirty-one-year-old married millionaire businessman Floyd Odlum. Before they married, he suggested that she should take up flying, since she would be able to expand her business faster; sure enough, she earned her pilot’s license in less than three weeks.⁵⁴ Like her Soviet counterparts, Cochran proved to be an amazing pilot, beating record after record, and she set even more records than her close friend, Amelia Earhart.

Conversely, fellow WASP bigwig Nancy Harkness Love earned her wings much earlier and through more auspicious circumstances. Educated at Vassar College, she had been flying since she was sixteen years old.⁵⁵ In September 1935, she started working for the United States Bureau of Air Commerce as a pilot under the National Air Marking

⁵² Strebe, *Flying for Her Country*, 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines*, 100.

Program, which called for pilots to “ mark roofs and other highly visible spots” in and around 16,000 cities and towns across America so that other pilots could orient themselves easier.⁵⁶ In 1936, she and her husband Robert H. Love founded Inter-city Airlines, an aviation company based in Boston, and she worked for the company as a pilot.⁵⁷

She was also a test pilot. In 1937, she tested a prototype of the aircar for the Gwinn Aircar Company in Buffalo, New York; this unique type of aircraft was a hybridized version of an airplane and a car, and was “designed to sustain a full perpendicular drop from 2000 feet, its three-wheeled undercarriage absorbing the entire stress of impact.”⁵⁸ The company’s president, Joseph Gwinn, flew with Love during a test run so he could find out the exact moment when the aircar’s undercarriage gave out. It proved to be a scary flight, even for his experienced test pilot, but both Gwinn and Love were impressed with the aircraft’s shock absorption, only feeling a slight jolt during the test. Love left the Gwinn Aircar Company in 1938, the same year that a newer prototype of the aircar killed its test pilot and passenger.⁵⁹

Just as the Soviet Union did not originally plan to have women pilots in their air force ranks, there were no immediate plans to send American women to the skies once the Second World War broke out. Amelia Earhart and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt supported the idea of women pilots before the war, but US Air Force Commanding General Henry H. Arnold, who ended up being one of the WASP’s staunchest advocates,

⁵⁶ Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II*, 17.

⁵⁷ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines*, 100.

⁵⁸ Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II*, 17.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

rebuffed the idea at the time.⁶⁰ First, at that point there “was a lack of planes, not of pilots,” and second, he did not think that women had what it took to fly airplanes.⁶¹ While both countries would not enter the war until Operation Barbarossa and the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, the United States wanted to prepare for war while also appearing neutral; therefore, the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) came about in 1939. By 1943, over 3,000 women earned pilot’s licenses through the program, which sent men as well as women to affordable flying schools across America.⁶²

The WASP program’s forebears are at least partially the brainchildren of Nancy Harkness Love and Jacqueline Cochran. Love founded the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) in September 1942. Originally having ten pilots under its wing, this number rose to twenty-eight by January 1943.⁶³ The founding of the Women’s Flying Training Detachment (WFTD) coincided with that of the WAFS, and was formed when General Arnold approved a memo from the Air Transport Command’s (ATC) Major General H.L. George. This memo asked for a training program for female pilots, and was inspired by Jacqueline Cochran’s proposed program. In July 1943, nearly a year after their establishment, the WAFS and WFTD merged into the WASP program.⁶⁴

Before long, the WASP ended up being a bigger program (in terms of mobilization and number of missions) than originally thought; indeed, soon after the United States entered World War II in December 1941, each of its military branches, including the air force, saw heavy losses.⁶⁵ Moreover, labour shortages across the board

⁶⁰ Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 11.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 11.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

(in military as well as civilian circles) meant that women could and often had to do their part for the war effort. To improve the critical military situation, General Arnold thought it best to free up as many qualified male pilots as possible for combat or overseas positions; the US Air Force also took into consideration that if the American mainland were under attack, how could women pilots be factored into the country's aerial defense?⁶⁶ At any rate, the WASP program proved to be immensely popular among young women across America, so much so that it was the only women's auxiliary that never needed a recruitment campaign.⁶⁷ Prospective WASPs usually heard about the program through personal invitations from Cochran and Love, word-of-mouth from other applicants, and sometimes through news articles, sporadic as they were.

Almost all of the WASPs “were trained at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas,” and during the program's existence (1942 to 1944), they flew over 60 million miles in training and on the job.⁶⁸ They were also paid for their work. After graduating from training, they commanded salaries of \$3,000 a year and were granted civilian Civil Air Patrol (CAP) status; however, while WASPs were “issued textbooks, flying suits, helmets, goggles, and parachutes,” they were responsible for their accommodations, food, transportation, civilian clothing, and other basic goods and services.⁶⁹

The WASP program's original purpose was to ferry airplanes across North America and sometimes overseas, and about half of its graduates had this task by the program's end. In fact, by the program's disbanding in December 1944, WASPs had

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

ferried 12,652 airplanes within the United States alone.⁷⁰ Over time, the WASPs also found themselves carrying out all sorts of tasks: among others, they served as test pilots, towed targets for live ammo, “trained ground crews in searchlights and tracking by flying night missions,” towed gliders, and sometimes went on top secret missions such as testing anti-radar equipment and even taking part in the Manhattan Project.⁷¹

Just who were the brave Soviet and American women who earned their wings as civilian and military pilots? There is no universal profile for either group. Soviet women pilots were young, and some even teenagers. Most were single, although some pilots were married and had children; perhaps the most famous of these frontline mothers were Raskova and Grizodubova themselves.⁷² As we will see, some women experienced the heartbreaking losses of their husbands or children during the war, while others, such as Raskova, entrusted relatives with the care of their children.⁷³

Those women first mobilized in October 1941 were usually between seventeen and twenty-four years old, and were often well-educated or highly skilled workers. Those who were “physicists, astronomers, engineers, historians, doctors, [...] teachers” and other professionals assumed positions of “commanding officers, combat navigators, engineers, radio operators,” gunners and pilots, while skilled workers usually became mechanics and armorers.⁷⁴

As far as the WASPs were concerned, veteran WASP Ethel Finley summed it up perfectly: “We came from all walks of life. Many were teachers. We had everything from teachers to a Ziegfeld Follies girl, clerks, secretaries, office workers – every walk of life.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷² Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II*, 41.

⁷³ Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 35.

⁷⁴ Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 128-129.

But I think underneath all of it was this kind of special characteristic of the love of flying, of patriotism and also the spirit of adventure.”⁷⁵ Of her class, veteran WASP Jean Hascall noted that they all had had least some flying experience (anywhere from the minimum thirty-five flying hours to several hundred flying hours), and were anywhere between eighteen to twenty-eight years old.⁷⁶ WASPs were also generally young. According to historian Helena Schrader, almost one out of every three WASPs was twenty-one years old or younger.⁷⁷

Like Finley, Cole observed that they “came from all corners of America, from the small towns and the big cities, from the privileged classes and the not-so-privileged. For each of us, flying was a passion, and some combination of daring, rebellion, and determination took us into the air.”⁷⁸ Certainly, while their origins differed, their end goals were often similar. However, it is important to note that while they were socioeconomically diverse, the WASPs were overwhelmingly white. Black women pilots certainly existed at this time, but they were excluded from the WASP program because of the Jim Crow laws in Texas, and there were only two Asian-American pilots, Hazel Ah Ying Lee and Maggie Gee.⁷⁹

Just as their backgrounds were heterogeneous, so too were the American and Soviet pilots’ reasons for taking up flying in the first place. It is this first theme to which we now turn.

⁷⁵ Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 15.

⁷⁶ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 7.

⁷⁷ Schrader, “Winged Auxiliaries,” 190.

⁷⁸ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 7.

⁷⁹ Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II*, 42-44.

Why We Fly

For either the American or the Soviet women pilots, there is no universal reason as to why they all chose to take up flying. However, some common themes emerge in their memoirs and biographies. In the Soviet case, many women's flying careers often began before the war under Osoaviakhim or the Komosomol (the state youth organization.) As mentioned earlier, the series of record-breaking flights in the 1930s, particularly the all-female *Rodina* flight, inspired several of these women to take to the skies before and during World War II, such as Lieutenant Valentina Petrochenkova-Neminushaya, Senior Lieutenant Zoya Parfenova-Akimova, and Major Yevgeniya Zhigulenko.⁸⁰

Several accounts also emphasize the fact that many women were inspired to fly after seeing planes flying over or landing in their often-remote villages. Major Mariya Smirnova, for example, was the daughter of peasants and briefly taught at the primary school level, but wanted to fly after watching planes flying at the local airdrome.⁸¹ When a plane made a forced landing in her remote Siberian village, a young Senior Lieutenant Serafima Amosova-Taranenko and the other children “were so excited, we ran around it, touching it.”⁸² Senior Lieutenant Antonina Bondareva-Spitsina's recollection is perhaps most illustrative of this zest for flying. Born into a working-class family, she always heard people talking about aviation, and especially because she “lived in a small village, [...] a plane, at that time even a glider, was a small miracle.”⁸³ When Bondareva-Spitsina was in the sixth grade, a biplane landed in her village: “When I saw that plane my heart

⁸⁰ Noggle, *A Dance with Death*, 175; and Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, 77, 123.

⁸¹ Noggle, *A Dance with Death*, 31.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 106.

began beating fast, and I fell in love with the aircraft at first sight.”⁸⁴ She went on to join a glider club and the 587th Day Bomber Aviation Regiment (later renamed the 125th Guards Bomber Regiment) when the Second World War began.

Sometimes the women faced opposition from loved ones when they wanted to become pilots. Captain Mariya Dolina grew up poor and had to support her family as a teenager, when her father lost his legs.⁸⁵ As a result, Dolina left school and worked at a plant while also attending glider school. Her mother was against her daughter taking up flying lessons, but the head of the school convinced her to let the promising student continue, especially since she was the only woman in her class. To quote Dolina, “No matter how much my parents objected, I knew from the moment I first got into the plane that I was born there in the air, and it became my main purpose in life – to fly.”⁸⁶ Moreover, the aspiring young pilot wanted more for herself; she “wanted to achieve something in life [and] was eager to get an education” despite her disadvantaged childhood.⁸⁷ Therefore, taking up flying gave Dolina and many others like her increased social mobility.

Similarly, fighter pilot Anna Timofeeva-Egorova was born in a peasant village, and as a teenager moved to Moscow to help build the Moscow Metro; later, she joined flying school via the Komsomol.⁸⁸ Upon sending her mother a telegram to inform her of her acceptance into flying school, she replied to her daughter that as happy as she was for her, she would have preferred for Anna to find work back home, especially now that she was an empty nester, her children having figuratively as well as literally found their

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Timofeeva-Egorova, *Over Fields of Fire*, 7, 13.

wings. “I’ve got eight of you – my children, and I am uneasy for all of you,” said her mother, “All of you – my baby birds – have flown away.”⁸⁹ As Timofeeva-Egorova observed in her memoirs, “Oh, mama, mama! How could I explain to you what flying meant to me? It was my life, my song, my love! He who has flown into the sky – found his wings – will never betray it and will be faithful to it till the end, and if it happens that he can no longer fly he’ll dream of flying even so...”⁹⁰ According to Dolina and Timofeeva-Egorova, it is clear that the sheer love of flying far outweighed anyone’s concerns.

One of the most obvious distinctions between Soviet and American women pilots is that unlike the United States, the Soviet Union faced an invasion, and its combatants and civilians were therefore in the middle of some of the bloodiest battles in history. The harsh realities of German aggression on the Eastern Front meant that many Soviet men and women wanted to defend their country, and one way to do this was by serving in the Red Air Force. For some women pilots, the war was incredibly and tragically personal. Junior Lieutenant Mariya Tepikina-Popova, for example, volunteered to serve in the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment (later called the 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment) to avenge the death of her husband, killed in action in 1941, as well as her son’s death in 1943.⁹¹ Junior Lieutenant Yevdokiya (Dusya) Nosal’ also flew to avenge the tragic death of her newborn son, who was killed when German bombs attacked their maternity hospital, and she would eventually die in combat herself.⁹² Finally, Zina

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Noggle, *A Dance with Death*, 60.

⁹² Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance*, 73.

Gorman's home village of Dranukhi was destroyed, her son buried alive, and so she fought as retribution for his senseless murder at the hands of the Nazis.⁹³

Indeed, the hatred for German soldiers was so intense that it translated into some women pilots' accounts years later. On why she enlisted, airplane mechanic Sergeant Irina Lunyova-Favorskaya noted, "I wanted to join the army to help the country beat the fascist Germans, to liberate the motherland. My comrades in arms, I discovered, all joined for the same reason."⁹⁴ In her memoirs, Anna Timofeeva-Egorova often refers to the Germans as Nazis, fascists, or even "Hitlerites," really driving home the point that they tended to paint all German troops with the same evil, fascist brush.⁹⁵

Like their Soviet counterparts, there were all sorts of reasons as to why the WASPs took up flying. Some had known that they wanted to fly since they were children. Jean Hascall Cole's father introduced her to flying when she was six, letting her and her eight-year-old sister fly with a pilot near their home. Wrote Cole, "I guess my father thought it would be a great experience for us, and it certainly was for me. Perhaps that's when I caught the 'bug,' and maybe that's why I never thought of being afraid in an airplane."⁹⁶ She took to the skies again in her early twenties, after her parents prevented her from going to college; half of her typist's salary went towards flying lessons.⁹⁷ Similarly, Madeline Sullivan was making a good living by working at a Fifth Avenue department store, and found herself with a lot of disposable income. As a result,

⁹³ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*, 28.

⁹⁴ Noggle, *A Dance with Death*, 208.

⁹⁵ Timofeeva-Egorova, *Over Fields of Fire*, 7.

⁹⁶ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 11-12.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

she spent some of those earnings to take flying lessons at the nearby Roosevelt Field airport.⁹⁸

Sadie Hawkins flew for the first time with her family as a five-year-old, and later recalled, “I thought it was great, and from that moment I wanted to fly.”⁹⁹ Ann Carl observed in her memoirs, “It was not simply by chance that in the end I chose aviation,” especially due to the fact that her father helped patent the joystick and would often take her and her brother to see mail planes arrive at Newark Airport at night when they were children.¹⁰⁰ Her fascination with aviation was cemented when Amelia Earhart visited her school, soon after her 1932 transatlantic flight – “I sat in the front row, enthralled.”¹⁰¹ She also read many books about travel and aviation from authors like Jules Verne and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and indeed, her love for the skies was “already ingrained in [her] before [she] even learned to fly.”¹⁰²

Others had familial connections to aviation. Leona Golbinec’s brother flew with her when she was a child, and Frances Smith’s father was General Chiang Kai-Shek’s personal pilot in the 1930s, while her brother later joined the US Air Force.¹⁰³ For those who were not as privileged, flying could serve as a means of social mobility, as it did for many of their Soviet counterparts. Lourette Puett was an orphan who started flying as a sixteen-year-old with “tremendous ambition to do something.”¹⁰⁴ Puett became a WASP “because that was the best place to get further flight training [for] free. [...] I was

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Carl, *A WASP among Eagles*, 31.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰³ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 17.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

eighteen at the time and I wasn't very mature, but I didn't have many problems in training. I loved flying."¹⁰⁵

In their memoirs and interviews, many WASPs talk about the sheer excitement and glamour of flying as a pull factor to taking to the skies. To quote Clarice Bergemann, "Flying was a very glamorous thing to do then. It had a lot to do with the movies, but flying was the most exciting thing you could do."¹⁰⁶ Jean Hascall Cole agreed. "The airplanes, the flying, even the weather fascinated" her, and she especially loved performing spins.¹⁰⁷

Of course, there were sometimes less glamorous reasons that compelled women to become WASPs. Nadine Nagle's husband, a B-24 pilot, was killed in the summer of 1942 while on a mission in England, and a month later she "read an article on the women pilots. [...] I got this patriotic feeling that I was to fly in his place."¹⁰⁸ This evokes the abovementioned Soviet women pilots, who avenged the deaths of their loved ones while simultaneously serving their country. Moreover, she "specifically took flying lessons because of this dramatic experience."¹⁰⁹

One of the reasons Marion Stegeman Hodgson took up flying and became a WASP was to get over her childhood fear.¹¹⁰ As a five-year-old, she had a traumatizing first experience on an airplane with her parents and siblings: "When the pilot started up the engines, there was such a terrifying roar that I clapped my hands over my ears and bellowed. My father – my hero, my comforter – took me on his lap and held me close to

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Merryman, *Clipped Wings*, 15.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Hodgson, *Winning my Wings*, 3.

make me feel safe, but for the only time in my life, it didn't work. As we taxied out to take-off position, my screams grew louder, until the pilot was forced to turn the plane back and let me off."¹¹¹ Like some of the Soviet pilots, Hodgson faced some familial opposition when she was finally ready to board a plane again. When the war broke out in 1941, Hodgson's mother refused to let her join the CPTP because her father had passed away two years earlier, and she did not want to lose another part of the family.¹¹² However, with the help of her grandmother and family friend/pilot Ned Hodgson, she was able to join the CPTP and eventually, the WASPs.¹¹³

Clearly, Soviet and American women pilots' reasons for flying and ultimately joining the regiments and the WASP program were as diverse as the women themselves, but we see that there was little difference when it came to nationality. The incentives for a Soviet woman to fly usually pushed her American counterpart to do the same. Although these reasons often varied, these women inevitably bonded with each other during training and while serving their respective countries.

Sisters (and Brothers) in Arms

Both the Soviet women pilots and the WASPs became close to their female and even male colleagues. In the Soviet case, such bonds were so strong that many of the surviving writings from airwomen are about other airwomen, be they living or having died in battle, such as Cottam's collection of biographies. Indeed, the pilots' wartime memories were not only shaped by their own experiences, but by others' experiences too;

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

they manifest themselves as more of a collective memory rather than from the experiences of a single person.

Some airmen initially scoffed at the idea of female pilots, but grew to respect them as they proved their aerial prowess. Major Valentin Markov is a case in point. He replaced Marina Raskova as commander of the mostly female 125th Guards Bomber Aviation Regiment after her tragic death in a plane crash in January 1943.¹¹⁴ Her regiment adored her, and Raskova's untimely death understandably affected them very much. Many accounts discuss her love for music, as well as her kindness, sense of humour, and her supportive nature.¹¹⁵ After Raskova died, they kept a photograph of her at their base, and each pilot kept a small picture of her "in a pocket on the leg of [their] flight suits."¹¹⁶ Not surprisingly, what followed would be a huge adjustment for both successor and subordinates.

On the airwomen's end, many called Markov "Bayonet" behind his back because of his tall, thin, and stern appearance.¹¹⁷ His tough commanding style also reduced some to tears, but at the same time, he gave them "no [...] allowances [just because they were] women."¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, Markov wrote that when he first found out that he would replace Raskova, he was noticeably upset around his colleagues. "Better don't ask, I am off to a women's regiment," he told them, also noting that his "friends pitied [him] openly."¹¹⁹ However, it was only a matter of time before this mutual dislike turned into respect and comradeship.

¹¹⁴ Markwick and Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*, 110.

¹¹⁵ Strebe, *Flying for Her Country*, 25.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 96.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Cottam, *Women in Air War*, 20.

Eventually, Markov recognized the women's flying skills and learned that they once even outperformed a male regiment nearby. "I was very gratified to overhear a commander scolding some pilot, approximately as follows: 'You made a lousy landing today! Well? Have you watched the girls landing? I can't face them now. Shame on you!' In short, I no longer regretted being assigned to this female regiment."¹²⁰ In fact, Markov grew to care for his female subordinates very much. He noted that while the women were happy that his superiors did not differentiate between them and male units, he "sometimes wished that they remembered that our regiment was made up of women and would not send them into the very hell."¹²¹ He "loved them all, was proud of them and dreaded the possibility that anyone of them might not return from a mission."¹²²

In no time, his regiment retired the "Bayonet" moniker and affectionately started calling him "Daddy," beginning a pseudo-familial bond that would last for decades. As Captain Valentina Savitskaya-Kravchenko told Anne Noggle in 1990, "I was 25 at that time and [Markov] was 33, and now we still call him Daddy."¹²³ Markov was so proud of his regiment that he personally requested an interview with Noggle, published two years after his death in 1992.

Other accounts show similar relationships. As mentioned earlier, Valentina Grizodubova served in WWII as the commander of an all-male regiment. They called her "Mama," giving her a motherly attribute, in line with the prevalent view of mothers as caring and protective.¹²⁴ But perhaps the most common relationship was that of brotherhood and sisterhood. Many airwomen reflect this idea, such as Sergeant Anna

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Noggle, *A Dance with Death*, 106.

¹²⁴ Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 262-263.

Shibayeva. After her husband died in the war, she had never remarried or had children, but noted, “I have very many sisters from my regiment.”¹²⁵ Indeed, male pilots often nicknamed the women “little sisters”.¹²⁶ Similarly, navigator Galina Brok observed that “brother” (male) regiments would treat their female cohorts well, and that “when there were friends in the sky, the attacking enemy fighters seemed less terrible.”¹²⁷

Finally, Anna Timofeeva-Egorova’s memoirs are full of these relationships. Back in flying school, her male colleagues nicknamed her Kokkinaky (in reference to the famous brother aviators) for her flying skills, and also called her by diminutives like Anya and Anyuta, which suggest their close friendship.¹²⁸ In her special case, however, brother and sisterly bonds helped to save her life. Timofeeva-Egorova was one of the few Soviet women to be taken as a POW by the Germans, in the Küstrin concentration camp.¹²⁹ Once there, fellow prisoners Dr. Sinyakov and nurse Yulia Krashchenko helped to treat her injuries after her plane was shot down. There were also French, Italian and British POWs who threw pieces of bread and sugar to her from behind barbed wire. Such relationships were not only brotherly and sisterly, but also borne of solidarity.

In the case of the WASPs, many trainees came to Sweetwater without knowing anyone, but they formed friendships almost immediately. According to Jean Hascall Cole, such friendships were compounded by the fact that they shared extremely cramped, no-frills barracks.¹³⁰ To quote Anne Noggle, “For those six months in training we were

¹²⁵ Noggle, *A Dance with Death*, 181.

¹²⁶ Cottam, *Women in Air War*, 117.

¹²⁷ Noggle, *A Dance with Death*, 94-95.

¹²⁸ Timofeeva-Egorova, *Over Fields of Fire*, 38, 101.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 151-154.

¹³⁰ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 24.

all as one – eating, studying, flying, and sleeping all in lock step, even thinking similar thoughts.”¹³¹

These friendships feature heavily in WASP’s recollections years later, but the words of Cole’s classmate Mary Strok make for an excellent summary: “It was just the height of anything I had ever done in my life, and even since. It was a marvellous experience. [...] I loved the comradeship of the girls, the trainers, the people who taught us. There was not a single one of them I didn’t care for, or thought wasn’t doing his job. Every day was a new adventure.”¹³² Cole herself wrote, “For me, the greatest value from the WASP experience came from the opportunity to meet, and become friends with, my classmates – and later with other WASPs whom I meet at the biennial meetings.”¹³³

Marion Stegeman Hodgson got along with several fellow WASPs, sending her mother some pictures and praising her male and female colleagues in her letters.¹³⁴

Of course, due to the difficult and dangerous nature of their work, WASP accounts also express the sadness surrounding their classmates who died in plane crashes or who “washed out” (failed training and were therefore discharged from the WASP program). Hodgson’s memoirs include both of these instances. Hazel Ah Ying Lee, whom Hodgson described as “a boisterous, first-generation Chinese-American and one of the funniest people I’d ever met,” was killed in 1944 when her P-63 collided with another, and Jane Champlin, “a likeable and popular kid” who was also an accomplished

¹³¹ Noggle, *For God, Country, and the Thrill of It*, 56.

¹³² Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 34.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹³⁴ Hodgson, *Winning my Wings*, 56-60.

athlete, died in 1943 when the plane she and her instructor were flying at night crashed.¹³⁵

Hodgson likewise discusses classmate Jane Chapman, who sadly washed out. “How can I tell you fools goodbye? I will never have friends like you again,” said Chapman, showing how close she had grown to her bunkmates before her untimely departure from the program.¹³⁶ In a letter to her mother, Hodgson said, “Poor Jane...I’ll surely miss her and her inimitable sense of humour. Poor gal cried for two days, and I cried right along with her most of the time.”¹³⁷

Aside from washing out and the risk of crashing, the WASPs sometimes had to overcome blatant sexism. Historian Lois K. Merry points out that cultural expectations of the time clashed the WASP program, considering the then-prevalent view of flying as a man’s job.¹³⁸ Moreover, some male pilots disapproved of the program because they thought the WASPs were stealing their jobs, when really they were freeing them up for combat roles in the European and Pacific theatres.¹³⁹

At times, this disapproval escalated into outright mistreatment. Jill McCormick recounted how she was harassed while at a hotel between ferrying airplanes. Male officers began lambasting the WASP program and called her a slut.¹⁴⁰ Another one drove them away and seemed to comfort her, but when McCormick left for the bus to the airport, he was surprised to see her go and offered her to join him in his room for drinks, and she “ran for the bus feeling sick to her stomach.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 53-54, 63.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹³⁸ Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II*, 70.

¹³⁹ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 111.

¹⁴⁰ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines*, 277.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

There is even evidence suggesting that sabotage was behind at least one WASP casualty. When Betty Taylor perished in a crash, Jacqueline Cochran launched an investigation and mechanics found traces of sugar in her plane's gas tank. However, the investigation never led to a possible culprit or motive.¹⁴² Still, the WASPs were able to prove their aerial prowess to sceptical male colleagues. Some tested the notoriously dangerous B-29 bomber, while Lydia Lindner successfully tested the A-25 dive-bomber in a death-defying mission.¹⁴³ Male pilots jokingly called the A-25 the "coffin" because it was extremely powerful and often redlined (i.e. was defective or in need of repairs.)¹⁴⁴ She even momentarily lost consciousness during her dive, but soon after she came to and was at sea level, Lindner heard a man's voice in her earphones: "Oh, that was great! Oh, man! Do that again!"¹⁴⁵ The next morning she did just that, and was told, "Hey, WASP, you're doing a great job. It's more cooperation than we've gotten from those guys they've been sending us."¹⁴⁶ In other words, Lindner was praised for simulating an aerial attack, something that male pilots before her were too cautious to carry out.¹⁴⁷

The abovementioned examples show that female and male pilots, be they Soviet or American, by and large got along with each other. Not only were these relationships close, they were also essential in forging strong and cohesive units. It should come as no surprise that sometimes, with men serving alongside them, friendship could develop into something more. It is this final theme, wartime romance, to which we now turn.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁴³ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 96-97.

¹⁴⁴ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines*, 213.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Love is in the Air

In *Soviet Women in Combat*, Anna Krylova glosses over potential romance at the front, essentially arguing that all's platonic in love and war. However, pilots' accounts during and after the war prove that this was anything but.¹⁴⁸

The harsh nature of war on the Eastern Front meant that many of these romances could not be realized. Flying ace Yevgeniya Rudneva's diary entries and letters show that she was corresponding with a suitor, Slavik, before she was killed in a plane crash in 1944. "I crave to talk to him so at time; I miss him so," she wrote on February 2, 1944.¹⁴⁹ In one of her last diary entries, dated March 5, 1944, she mused on a movie she saw called *Wait for Me*: "Slavik had seen it too. [...] My darling, I trust you. And do you know why? According to the movie, 'Real men...definitely come back to women who wait for them faithfully. I do wait faithfully for you, Slavik, and I blame the absence of your letters on the mail service.'"¹⁵⁰

Similarly, several primary and secondary sources discuss the relationship between fighter ace Lilia Litvyak and Alexei Solomatin. Solomatin cared a great deal about Litvyak, and carried a picture of her in his cockpit.¹⁵¹ He loved her, and she only realized she loved him after he died.¹⁵² In a letter to her mother dated May 1943, "You see, he was a fellow not to my taste, but his persistence and his love for me compelled me to love him, and now...it seems to me that I will never again meet such a person."¹⁵³ According

¹⁴⁸ Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 282-283.

¹⁴⁹ Cottam, *Women in Air War*, 186-189.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁵¹ Cottam, *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*, 57.

¹⁵² Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 138.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 139.

to her mechanic, Inna Pasportnikova, Solomatin's death only intensified Litvyak's desire to fly and to fight.¹⁵⁴ Litvyak herself was killed in a plane crash in August 1943.

Other wartime romances, however, were not as star-crossed. Among the most touching was that of Major Markov and one of his subordinates, Senior Lieutenant Galina Dzhunkovskaya. Sergeant Antonina Lepilina, a mechanic for the regiment, told Anne Noggle that while she and others always thought that the two had feelings for each other, their relationship remained strictly platonic and professional in front of them; however, these thoughts were cemented when Dzhunkovskaya and Captain Mariya Dolina had to make an emergency landing. "When the girls were brought back burned and injured," said Lepilina, "Valentin Markov himself carried Galina out of the plane and over to the vehicle to bring them to the regiment. Then we all knew his feelings for her. They were married after the war."¹⁵⁵

Markov and Dzhunkovskaya were just one of the many happy couples forged in the uncertain and often deadly crucible of war. Mariya Dolina recalled, "Once we were stationed at an airdrome that had a male regiment [...] nearby. About half of our regiment made happy marriages with members of that regiment," including herself.¹⁵⁶ After she was widowed in 1972, she married her divorced wartime mechanic and began a new family with him. Her friends told her "that two broken hearts had been united."¹⁵⁷

Sergeant Nina Shebalina, a mechanic, summed up frontline romance this way to Anne Noggle:

Sometimes we had a day off, and we gathered in the barracks or wherever, combed our hair, and trimmed ourselves. We wanted to make ourselves

¹⁵⁴ Yenne, *The White Rose of Stalingrad*, 250.

¹⁵⁵ Noggle, *A Dance with Death*, 129.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

look pretty and attractive and womanlike, in spite of the uniform clothing. Our regiment was a female regiment, but there were a lot of male pilots and mechanics, and we wanted to make an impression. Lots of us fell in love, and after the war we married, having been through the war together. Yes, we had the time to fall in love – life is life!¹⁵⁸

This notion, “life is life,” emerges as a common theme in airwomen’s interviews with Anne Noggle when it came to love at the front. To quote Senior Lieutenant Yevgeniya Zhigulenko, “We, as military pilots, still remained young girls. We dreamed of our grooms, marriages, children, and a future happy, peaceful life.”¹⁵⁹ As Zhigulenko and Shebalina observed and many others found out firsthand, the hardships of war did not take away from romantic bonds; rather, they only made these bonds stronger and all the more profound.

The WASPs, meanwhile, found love – and lust – in all sorts of situations. It should be noted that at Avenger Field, WASPs could not socialize with (or more specifically, date) their instructors.¹⁶⁰ However, considering the fact that many WASPs and instructors married after the war, this rule was definitely broken, although such romances had to be under the radar.¹⁶¹

Of course, sex had to be even more undercover, so to speak. To quote Sally Van Wegenen Keil, “Far removed from the stern gazes of their hometown neighbours and preachers, and consistent with the extraordinary adventurousness of learning to fly and joining the WASP in the first place, the WASPs often had a more uninhibited attitude toward relationships than many Americans.”¹⁶² Indeed, Keil notes that “an indeterminate

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁶⁰ Keil, *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines*, 150.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 254.

number of” WASPs engaged in sexual activity while at 5,000 feet in the air, thus becoming among the first members of the “Mile-High Club.”¹⁶³ Still, liaisons had to be covert, lest those involved be subject to court-martial.¹⁶⁴

Other WASPs had more conventional ways of meeting dates and even husbands. Some met their husbands at air bases,¹⁶⁵ while others found dates and/or dancing partners during nights out. WASP Adela Scharr is a unique example. She accompanied army nurses to a party at a local officers’ club, and while they were dressed fancy and ready to mingle, she was still wearing her bulky WASP uniform and had no makeup on.¹⁶⁶ To her friends’ surprise, all of the “eager pursuit pilots” wanted to dance with her, and unbeknownst to the nurses, this was partially because Scharr had actually flown to the club in a P-51, a new fighter jet that her dancing partners begged her to take for a spin.¹⁶⁷

Marion Stegeman Hodgson’s relationship with Ned Hodgson is a story arc that features so heavily in her memoirs about her time in the WASP program that it deserves to be told on its own. She introduces him as a former Marine pilot who was badly burned in a plane crash and hospitalized for several months of their correspondence.¹⁶⁸

As a WASP, Hodgson dated around. In one of her many letters to her mother, she said that she did not “want to get serious about [anyone] until [the] war [was] over.”¹⁶⁹ She also gushed about all kinds of male cadets she met at dances.¹⁷⁰ At the same time,

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁶⁵ Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, 93.

¹⁶⁶ Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II*, 71.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Hodgson, *Winning my Wings*, 2.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

Hodgson made sure to keep in touch with Ned ever since the plane crash that nearly killed him.¹⁷¹

Eventually, their deep-rooted friendship evolved into something more. On Christmas Eve 1943, Ned and Marion shared their first kiss while back home in Georgia, setting off a back-and-forth of letters where they debated – was it lust or love that they really felt for each other?¹⁷² After a few months of mutual confusion, anxiety, and borderline heartbreak, she finally professed her love for him in a letter the following February: “I’m risking hurting you some day and I know it, but I love you so damn much that if I keep it inside me any more I’ll burst. I just have to tell you. I think you’re the finest, most sincere, most lovable – and lustworthy! – person I’ve ever known. I look at that little picture I have of you all the time and I don’t know how I can stand it until I see you again.”¹⁷³ This love was reciprocated, as shown by Ned’s sweet and off-color pet names for her (“Miss Lovely,” “Miss Glamazon”) and himself (“your lascivious ole bastard”), and after several letter exchanges where they discussed their future together, they finally married in June 1944, after she voluntarily left the WASP program.¹⁷⁴

Although many Soviet and American airwomen found their happy-ever-afters once the war ended, the same cannot be said for the special groups to which they belonged.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 154, 160-163.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-170, 175, 251.

Conclusion

As the Second World War finally came to a close, so did the WASP program as well as the Soviet women's aviation regiments. The WASP's end actually predated that of the war itself by mere months.

By 1944, an Allied victory was imminent, and American media started to highlight "a return to prewar values" where women would be relegated back to the domestic sphere.¹⁷⁵ As a result, articles about women in the military were highly critical, arguing that they threatened the postwar economy – and all the while, the WASP was fighting for militarization. After heavy lobbying in Congress and extensive media coverage (most of it anti-WASP), the WASP bill was defeated on June 21, 1944, and the program itself officially disbanded six months later.¹⁷⁶ At the last WASP graduation on December 7, General Arnold emphasized that the program was not all for naught:

I want to stress how valuable I believe this whole WASP program has been. If another national emergency arises – let us hope it does not, but let us this time face the possibility – if it does, we will not again look upon a women's flying organization as an experiment. We will know that that they can handle our fastest fighters, our heaviest bombers; we will know that they are capable of ferrying, target towing, flying training, test flying, and the countless other activities which you have proved you can do.¹⁷⁷

Still, most WASPs moved on to other endeavours after the war. They went to college, married, started families, and generally worked outside of aviation, although some flew for fun even years afterward.¹⁷⁸ In 1977, even though the war had been over for more than three decades, the WASPs became involved in one last battle – fighting for military status. The WASP bill was reintroduced in Congress that March, and after strong

¹⁷⁵ Strebe, *Flying For Her Country*, 59.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 60-64.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

testimony about what made the program subject to militarization, President Jimmy Carter signed the bill into law on November 23, 1977, effectively granting former WASPs full military status and eligibility for veterans' benefits.¹⁷⁹

After V-E Day, the Soviet military began a gradual demobilization and exclusion of women across the board. According to historian Reina Pennington, this was partially because of the prevalent cultural view that war and military service, "except during emergencies," was exclusively the domain of men, but also because of postwar pronatalism and the need for civilian workers.¹⁸⁰ Like the WASPs, many Soviet female veterans started families after the war, and some even managed to find work as pilots in the civil sector; most, however, worked outside of aviation altogether.¹⁸¹

Thirty-eight WASPs and sixty-seven men and women in the three Soviet regiments were killed during the war, having made the ultimate sacrifice in serving their country.¹⁸² Those who survived made sure to keep in touch over the years, and Marion Stegeman Hodgson describes a very special reunion in May 1990, forty-five years after the war's end: "The best reunion of all was when a group of us [WASPs] went to the USSR in May 1990 to meet Soviet women pilots, our sisters in World War II who flew combat. For us, the Cold War ended that May."¹⁸³ Indeed, several attendees felt strong sisterly bonds despite the cultural, linguistic and political barriers.¹⁸⁴

The Second World War thrust Soviet and American women into roles they had never before taken on, and proved that they could in the first place. Although their tasks

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

¹⁸⁰ Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 143-144.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 148-157.

¹⁸² Merry, *Women Military Pilots of World War II*, 112.

¹⁸³ Hodgson, *Winning my Wings*, 256.

¹⁸⁴ Strebe, *Flying For Her Country*, 81.

often differed, it is clear that they were not all that different in the end. They faced opposition and overcame several obstacles. They formed lifelong bonds, be they with girlfriends, male friends, or husbands, and they served their respective countries when the call of duty had never been greater. These women found friendship, found love, and in serving their country, found themselves. History has made them allies, but the sky has made them sisters.

Works Cited

- Baidukov, Georgiy. *Russian Lindbergh: The Life of Valery Chkalov*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.
- Bergman, Jay. "Valerii Chkalov: Soviet Pilot as New Soviet Man." *Journal of Contemporary History* 33 no. 1 (Jan. 1998): 135-152.
- Carl, Ann B. *A WASP among Eagles: A Woman Military Test Pilot in WWII*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999.
- Cochran, Jacqueline. *The Stars at Noon*. Boston; Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1954.
- Cole, Jean Hascall. *Women Pilots of World War II*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992.
- Cottam, Kazimiera Janina. *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers*. Nepean, ON: New Military Publishing, 1998.
- Cottam, Kazimiera Janina and Galina Markova. *Soviet Airwomen in Combat in World War II*. Manhattan, KS: Military Affairs/Aerospace Historian, 1983.
- Cottam, Kazimiera Janina. *In the Sky Above the Front: A Collection of Memoirs of Soviet Airwomen Participants in the Great Patriotic War*. Manhattan, KS: MA/AH Publishing, 1984.
- Cottam, Kazimiera Janina. *Women in Air War: The Eastern Front of World War II*. Nepean, ON: New Military Publishing, 1997.
- Hodgson, Marion Stegeman. *Winning my Wings: A Woman Airforce Pilot in World War II*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1996.
- Keil, Sally Van Wagenen. *Those Wonderful Women in Their Flying Machines: The Unknown Heroines of World War II*. New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, 1979.
- Krylova, Anna. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Litoff, Judy Barrett, and David C. Smith, eds. *We're in This War, Too: World War II Letters from American Women in Uniform*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Markwick, Roger D., and Euridice Charon Cardona. *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

- McCannon, John. "Days of Glory: The Major Expeditions, 1932-1939," in McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932-1939*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Merry, Lois K. *Women Military Pilots of World War II: A History with Biographies of American, British, Russian and German Aviators*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011.
- Merryman, Molly. *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- Noggle, Anne. *A Dance with Death: Soviet Airwomen in World War II*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1994.
- Noggle, Anne. *For God, Country, and the Thrill of It: Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II: Photographic Portraits and Text*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1990.
- Palmer, Scott W. *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Pateman, Yvonne C. "Women Airforce Service Pilots: WASP." In Holm and Bellafaire, eds., *In Defense of a Nation: Servicewomen in World War II*. Washington, D.C.: Military Women's Press, 1998.
- Paynich, Timothy. "Celebrities or Scapegoats? Women in Prewar Soviet Aviation." *Minerva Journal of Women and War* 2 no. 1 (Spring 2008): 70-83.
- Pennington, Reina. *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001.
- Schrader, Helena P. "Winged Auxiliaries: Women Pilots in the UK and US During World War Two." *The Journal of Navigation* 59, no. 2 (2006): 187-199.
- Strebe, Amy Goodpaster. *Flying for Her Country: The American and Soviet Women Military Pilots of World War II*. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007.
- Timofeeva-Egorova, Anna. *Over Fields of Fire: Flying the Sturmovik in Action on the Eastern Front, 1942-45*. Solihull, UK: Helion & Company, 2010.
- Timofeeva-Egorova, Anna. *Red Sky, Black Death: A Soviet Woman Pilot's Memoir of the Eastern Front*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2009.
- Yellin, Emily. *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II*. New York: Free Press, 2004.

Yenne, Bill. *The White Rose of Stalingrad: The Real-Life Adventure of Lidiya Vladimirovna Litvyak, the Highest Scoring Female Air Ace of All Time*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2013.