

## Veteran Politics and Memory Abstract

During World War II, nearly one million Soviet women served in the military, with approximately half of them on the front lines. These women were an integral part of Allied victory, yet female units were the first to be demobilized. Women served honorably in combat as snipers, medics, airwomen, machine-gunners, and tankers, proving themselves as capable as their male comrades on the battlefield. The completion of the war meant a return to pre-war gender norms, to become mothers. But their return from war was marked by assumptions that women were only at the front to be prostitutes and “field wives.” Men they served with said nothing, but civilians, especially women, saw these female veterans as “rifle sluts, military bitches, and army whores.” Women veterans became tarnished and were unfit for marriage. So they did not speak about their time on the eastern front. They kept silent as men participated in victory parades and commemorations that ignored female combatants. Male veterans were met with respect, while civilians regarded women with suspicion and hostility. Many women learned it was best to keep their front-line service a secret and process their trauma among themselves. Shame accompanied their service, and they became invisible participants in the war. Not until the 1970s did the Soviet State recognize their contributions. With the passage of 30 years, women were still reluctant to discuss their service, traumatized by the falsehoods and slut-shaming aimed at them after the war. Even after their service was recognized, monuments to the Great Patriotic War often depicted “Mother Russia” rather than the women who fought for her, alluding to women’s role as grieving mothers, rather than soldiers. This erasure in victory celebrations and commemorations leads to a complicated legacy of Soviet women’s role in World War II, and how their service is remembered that is still being analyzed today.

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