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# THE UNWOMANLY FACE OF WAR

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AN ORAL HISTORY OF WOMEN  
IN WORLD WAR II

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SVETLANA  
ALEXIEVICH

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## "I DON'T WANT TO REMEMBER . . ."

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*An old three-story house on the outskirts of Minsk, one of those built hastily just after the war and, as it then seemed, not meant to last, now cozily overgrown with old jasmine bushes. With it began a search that went on for seven years, seven extraordinary and tormenting years, during which I was to discover for myself the world of war, a world the meaning of which we cannot fully fathom. I would experience pain, hatred, temptation. Tenderness and perplexity . . . I would try to understand what distinguishes death from murder and where the boundary is between the human and the inhuman. How does a human being remain alone with the insane thought that he or she might kill another human being? Is even obliged to? And I would discover that in war there is, apart from death, a multitude of other things; there is everything that is in our ordinary life. War is also life. I would run into countless human truths. Mysteries. I would ponder questions the existence of which I had never suspected. For instance, why is it that we are not surprised at evil, why this absence in us of surprise in the face of evil?*

*A road and many roads . . . Dozens of trips all over the country, hundreds of recorded cassettes, thousands of yards of tape. Five hundred meetings, after which I stopped counting; faces left my memory, only voices remained. A chorus resounds in my memory. An enormous chorus; sometimes the words almost cannot be heard, only the weeping. I confess: I did not always believe that I was strong enough for this path, that I could make it. Could reach the end. There were moments of doubt and fear, when I wanted to stop or step aside, but I no longer could. I fell captive to evil, I looked into the abyss in order to understand*

something. Now I seem to have acquired some knowledge, but there are still more questions, and fewer answers.

But then, at the very beginning of the path, I had no suspicion of that . . . What led me to this house was a short article in the local newspaper about a farewell party given at the Udamile automobile factory in Minsk for the senior accountant Maria Ivanovna Morozova, who was retiring. During the war, the article said, she had been a sniper, had eleven combat decorations, and her total as a sniper was seventy-five killings. It was hard to bring together mentally this woman's wartime profession with her peacetime occupation. With the routine newspaper photograph. With all these tokens of the ordinary.

. . . A small woman with a long braid wound in a girl's crown around her head was sitting in a big armchair, covering her face with her hands.

"No, no, I won't. Go back there again? I can't. . . To this day I can't watch war movies. I was very young then. I dreamed and grew, grew and dreamed. And then—the war. I even feel sorry for you. . . I know what I'm talking about. . . Do you really want to know that? I ask you like a daughter. . ."

Of course she was surprised.

"But why me? You should talk to my husband, he likes to remember. . . The names of the commanders, the generals, the numbers of units—he remembers everything. I don't. I only remember what happened to me. My own war. There were lots of people around, but you were always alone, because a human being is always alone in the face of death. I remember the terrifying solitude."

She asked me to take the tape recorder away.

"I need your eyes in order to tell about it, and that will hinder me."

But a few minutes later she forgot about it. . .

### Maria Ivanovna Morozova (Ivanushkina)

#### CORPORAL, SNIPER

This will be a simple story. . . The story of an ordinary Russian girl, of whom there were many then. . .

The place where my native village, Diakovskoe, stood is now the Proletarian District of Moscow. When the war began, I was not quite eighteen. Long, long braids, down to my knees. . . Nobody believed the war would last, everybody expected it to end any moment. We would drive out the enemy. I worked on a kolhoz, then finished accounting school and began to work. The war went on. . . My girlfriends. . . They tell me: "We should go to the front." It was already in the air. We all signed up and took classes at the local recruitment office. Maybe some did it just to keep one another company, I don't know. They taught us to shoot a combat rifle, to throw hand grenades. At first. . . I'll confess, I was afraid to hold a rifle, it was unpleasant. I couldn't imagine that I'd go and kill somebody, I just wanted to go to the front. We had forty people in our group. Four girls from our village, so we were all friends; five from our neighbors; in short—some from each village. All of them girls. . . The men had all gone to the war already, the ones who could. Sometimes a messenger came in the middle of the night, gave them two hours to get ready, and they'd be carted off. They could even be taken right from the fields. (Silence.) I don't remember now—whether we had dances; if we did, the girls danced with girls, there were no boys left. Our villages became quiet.

Soon an appeal came from the central committee of Komsomol\* for the young people to go and defend the Motherland, since the Germans were already near Moscow. Hitler take Moscow? We won't allow it! I wasn't the only one. . . All our girls expressed the wish to go to the front. My father was already fighting. We thought we were the only ones like that. . . Special ones. . .

cruitment office and there were lots of girls there. I just gasped! My heart was on fire, so intensely. The selection was very strict. First of all, of course, you had to have robust health. I was afraid they wouldn't take me, because as a child I was often sick, and my frame was weak, as my mother used to say. Other children insulted me because of it when I was little. And then, if there were no other children in a household except the girl who wanted to go to the front, they also refused: a mother should not be left by herself. Ah, our darling mothers! Their tears never dried . . . They scolded us, they begged . . . But in our family there were two sisters and two brothers left—true, they were all much younger than me, but it counted anyway. There was one more thing: everybody from our kolhoz was gone, there was nobody to work in the fields, and the chairman didn't want to let us go. In short, they refused us. We went to the district committee of Komсомол, and there—refusal. Then we went as a delegation from our district to the regional Komсомол. There was great inspiration in all of us; our hearts were on fire. Again we were sent home. We decided, since we were in Moscow, to go to the central committee of Komсомол, to the top, to the first secretary. To carry through to the end . . . Who would be our spokesman? Who was brave enough? We thought we would surely be the only ones there, but it was impossible even to get into the corridor, let alone to reach the secretary. There were young people from all over the country, many of whom had been under occupation, spoiling to be revenged for the death of their near ones. From all over the Soviet Union. Yes, yes . . . In short, we were even taken aback for a while . . .

By evening we got to the secretary after all. They asked us: "So, how can you go to the front if you don't know how to shoot?" And we said in a chorus that we had already learned to shoot . . . "Where? . . . How? . . . And can you apply bandages?" You know, in that group at the recruiting office our local doctor taught us to apply bandages. That shut them up, and they began to look at us more seriously. Well, we had another trump card in our hands, that we weren't alone, there were forty of us, and we could all shoot and give first aid. They told us: "Go

and wait. Your question will be decided in the affirmative." How happy we were as we left! I'll never forget it . . . Yes, yes . . .

And literally in a couple of days we received our call-up papers . . . We came to the recruiting office; we went in one door at once and were let out another. I had such a beautiful braid, and I came out without it . . . Without my braid . . . They gave me a soldier's haircut . . . They also took my dress. I had no time to send the dress or the braid to my mother . . . She very much wanted to have something of mine left with her . . . We were immediately dressed in army shirts, forage caps, given kit bags and loaded into a freight train—on straw. But fresh straw, still smelling of the field.

We were a cheerful cargo. Cocky. Full of jokes. I remember laughing a lot.

Where were we going? We didn't know. In the end it was not so important to us what we'd be. So long as it was at the front. Everybody was fighting—and we would be, too. We arrived at the Shchelkovo station. Near it was a women's sniper school. It turned out we were sent there. To become snipers. We all rejoiced. This was something real. We'd be shooting.

We began to study. We studied the regulations: of garrison service, of discipline, of camouflage in the field, of chemical protection. The girls all worked very hard. We learned to assemble and disassemble a sniper's rifle with our eyes shut, to determine wind speed, the movement of the target, the distance to the target, to dig a foxhole, to crawl on our stomach—we had already mastered all that. Only so as to get to the front the sooner. In the line of fire . . . Yes, yes . . . At the end of the course I got the highest grade in the exam for combat and noncombat service. The hardest thing, I remember, was to get up at the sound of the alarm and be ready in five minutes. We chose boots one or two sizes larger, so as not to lose time getting into them. We had five minutes to dress, put our boots on, and line up. There were times when we ran out to line up in boots over bare feet. One girl almost had her feet frostbitten. The sergeant major noticed it, reprimanded her, and then taught us to use footwraps. He stood over us

and droned: "How am I to make soldiers out of you, my dear girls, and not targets for Fritz?" Dear girls, dear girls . . . Everybody loved us and pitied us all the time. And we resented being pitied. Weren't we soldiers like everybody else?

Well, so we got to the front. Near Orsha . . . The 62nd Infantry Division . . . I remember like today, the commander, Colonel Borodkin, saw us and got angry: "They've foisted girls on me. What is this, some sort of women's round dance?" he said. "Corps de ballet! It's war, not a dance. A terrible war . . ." But then he invited us, treated us to a dinner. And we heard him ask his adjutant: "Don't we have something sweet for tea?" Well, of course, we were offended: What does he take us for? We came to make war . . . And he received us not as soldiers, but as young girls. At our age we could have been his daughters. "What am I going to do with you, my dears? Where did they find you?" That's how he treated us, that's how he met us. And we thought we were already seasoned warriors . . . Yes, yes . . . At war!

The next day he made us show that we knew how to shoot, how to camouflage ourselves in the field. We did the shooting well, even better than the men snipers, who were called from the front for two days of training, and who were very surprised that we were doing their work. It was probably the first time in their lives they saw women snipers. After the shooting it was camouflage in the field . . . The colonel came, walked around looking at the clearing, then stepped on a hummock—saw nothing. Then the "hummock" under him begged: "Ow, Comrade Colonel, I can't anymore, you're too heavy." How we laughed! He couldn't believe it was possible to camouflage oneself so well. "Now," he said, "I take back my words about young girls." But even so he suffered . . . Couldn't get used to us for a long time.

Then came the first day of our "hunting" (so snipers call it). My partner was Masha Kozlova. We camouflaged ourselves and lay there: I'm on the lookout, Masha's holding her rifle. Suddenly Masha says: "Shoot, shoot! See—it's a German . . ."

I say to her: "I'm the lookout. You shoot!"

"While we're sorting it out," she says, "he'll get away."

But I insist: "First we have to lay out the shooting map, note the landmarks: where the shed is, where the birch tree . . ."

"You want to start fooling with paperwork like at school? I've come to shoot, not to mess with paperwork!"

I see that Masha is already angry with me.

"Well, shoot then, why don't you?"

We were bickering like that. And meanwhile, in fact, the German officer was giving orders to the soldiers. A wagon arrived, and the soldiers formed a chain and handed down some sort of freight. The officer stood there, gave orders, then disappeared. We're still arguing. I see he's already appeared twice, and if we miss him again, that will be it. We'll lose him. And when he appeared for the third time—it was just momentary; now he's there, now he's gone—I decided to shoot. I decided, and suddenly a thought flashed through my mind: he's a human being; he may be an enemy, but he's a human being—and my hands began to tremble, I started trembling all over, I got chills. Some sort of fear . . . That feeling sometimes comes back to me in dreams even now . . . After the plywood targets, it was hard to shoot at a living person. I see him in the telescopic sight, I see him very well. As if he's close . . . And something in me resists . . . Something doesn't let me, I can't make up my mind. But I got hold of myself, I pulled the trigger . . . He waved his arms and fell. Whether he was dead or not, I didn't know. But after that I trembled still more, some sort of terror came over me: I killed a man? I had to get used even to the thought of it. Yes . . . In short—horrible! I'll never forget it . . .

When we came back, we started telling our platoon what had happened to us. They called a meeting. We had a Komсомол leader, Klava Ivanova; she reassured me: "They should be hated, not pitied . . ." Her father had been killed by the fascists. We would start singing, and she would beg us: "No, don't, dear girls. Let's first defeat these vermin, then we'll sing."



And not right away . . . We didn't manage right away. It's not a woman's task—to hate and to kill. Not for us . . . We had to persuade ourselves. To talk ourselves into it . . .

*A few days later Maria Ivanovna would call and invite me to see her war friend Klavdia Grigoryevna Krokhina. And once again I would hear . . .*

### Klavdia Grigoryevna Krokhina

FIRST SERGEANT, SNIPER

The first time is frightening . . . Very frightening . . .

We were in hiding, and I was the lookout. And then I noticed one German poking up a little from a trench. I clicked, and he fell. And then, you know, I started shaking all over, I heard my bones knocking. I cried. When I shot at targets it was nothing, but now: I—killed! I killed some unknown man. I knew nothing about him, but I killed him.

Then it passed. And here's how . . . It happened like this . . . We were already on the advance. We marched past a small settlement. I think it was in Ukraine. And there by the road we saw a barrack or a house, it was impossible to tell, it was all burned down, nothing left but blackened stones. A foundation . . . Many of the girls didn't go close to it, but it was as if something drew me there . . . There were human bones among the cinders, with scorched little stars among them; these were our wounded or prisoners who had been burned. After that, however many I killed, I felt no pity. I had seen those blackened little stars . . .

. . . I came back from the war gray-haired. Twenty-one years old, but my hair was completely white. I had been badly wounded, had a concussion, poor hearing in one ear. Mama met me with the words: "I believed you'd come back. I prayed for you day and night." My brother had fallen at the front.

Mama lamented: "It's all the same now—to give birth to girls or boys. But still he was a man, he had to defend the Motherland, but you're a girl. I asked one thing of God, that if they disfigure you, better let them kill you. I went to the train station all the time. To meet the trains. Once I saw a girl soldier there with a burned face . . . I shuddered—you! Afterward I prayed for her, too."

In the Chelyabinsk region, where I was born, they were doing some sort of mining not far from our house. As soon as the blasting began—it was always during the night for some reason—I instantly jumped out of the bed and grabbed my coat first thing—and ran, I had to run somewhere quickly. Mama would catch me, press me to her, and talk to me: "Wake up, wake up. The war is over. You're home." I would come to my senses at her words: "I'm your mama. Mama . . ." She spoke softly. Softly . . . Loud talk frightened me . . .

*The room is warm, but Klavdia Grigoryevna wraps herself in a heavy plaid blanket—she is cold. She goes on:*

We quickly turned into soldiers . . . You know, there was no real time to think. To dwell on our feelings . . .

Our scouts took a German officer prisoner, and he was extremely surprised that so many soldiers had been killed at his position, and all with shots in the head. Almost in the same spot. A simple rifleman, he insisted, would be unable to make so many hits to the head. That's certain. "Show me," he asked, "the rifleman who killed so many of my soldiers. I received a large reinforcement, but every day up to ten men fell." The commander of the regiment says: "Unfortunately, I cannot show you. It was a girl sniper, but she was killed." It was our Sasha Shliakhova. She died in a snipers' duel. And what betrayed her was her red scarf. She liked that scarf very much. But a red scarf is visible against white snow. When the German officer heard that it was a girl, he was staggered, he didn't know how to react. He was silent for

a long time. At the last interrogation before he was sent to Moscow (he turned out to be a bigwig), he confessed: "I've never fought with women. You're all beautiful . . . And our propaganda tells us that it's hermaphrodites and not women who fight in the Red Army . . ." So he understood nothing. No . . . I can't forget . . .

We went in pairs. It's very hard to sit alone from sunup to sundown; your eyes get tired, watery, your hands lose their feeling, your whole body goes numb with tension. It's especially hard in spring. The snow melts under you; you spend the whole day in water. You float in it; sometimes you freeze to the ground. We started out at daybreak and came back from the front line when it got dark. For twelve hours or more we lay in the snow or climbed to the top of a tree, onto the roof of a shed or a ruined house, and there camouflaged ourselves, so that the enemy wouldn't see where we were observing them from. We tried to find a position as close as possible: seven or eight hundred, sometimes only five hundred yards separated us from the trenches where the Germans sat. Early in the morning we could even hear their talk. Laughter.

I don't know why we weren't afraid . . . Now I don't understand it. We were advancing, advancing very quickly . . . And we ran out of stream, our supplies lagged behind: we ran out of ammunition, out of provisions, and the kitchen was demolished by a shell. For three days we ate nothing but dry crusts; our tongues were so scraped we couldn't move them. My partner was killed, and I went to the front line with a "new" girl. And suddenly we saw a colt on "no man's land." Such a pretty one, with a fluffy tail . . . Walking about calmly, as if there wasn't any war. And I heard the Germans make some stir, having seen him. Our soldiers also started talking among themselves.

"He'll get away. Could make a nice soup . . ."

"You can't hit him with a submachine gun at such a distance . . ."

They saw us.

"The snipers are coming. They'll get him straight off . . . Go on, girls!"

I had no time to think; out of habit I took aim and fired. The colt's legs buckled under him; he collapsed on his side. It seemed to me—maybe it was a hallucination—but it seemed to me that he gave a thin, high whinny.

Only then did it hit me: why had I done it? Such a pretty one, and I killed him, I put him into a soup! I heard someone sob behind me. I turned; it was the "new" girl.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I'm sorry for the colt . . ."—and her eyes were full of tears.

"Oh, oh, what a sensitive nature! And we've gone hungry for a whole three days. You're sorry because you haven't buried anyone yet. Go and try marching twenty miles a day with a full kit, and hungry to boot. First drive Fritz out and later we can get emotional. We can feel sorry. Later . . . Understand, later . . ."

I look at the soldiers who just now had egged me on, shouted. Asked me, just now . . . A few minutes ago . . . Nobody looks at me, as if they don't notice me; each of them drops his eyes and goes about his own business. Smokes, digs . . . One is sharpening something . . . And I can do as I like. Sit down and cry. How! As if I'm some sort of a butcher, who doesn't mind killing just like that. But I had loved all living creatures since childhood. We had a cow—I was already going to school—and it got sick and had to be slaughtered. I cried for two days. Couldn't calm down. And here—bang!—I shot a defenseless colt. What can I say . . . It was the first colt I'd seen in two years . . .

In the evening supper was served. The cooks: "Well, young sniper! Tonight we've got meat in the pot . . ." They set down the pots and left. And my girls sat and didn't touch the supper. I understood what it was about, burst into tears, and ran out of the dugout . . . The girls ran after me, started comforting me. Then quickly grabbed their pots and began to eat . . .

Yes, that's how things were . . . Yes . . . I can't forget . . .

At night we talked, of course. What did we talk about? Of course, about home, each told about her own mother, and the father or brother.

ers who were fighting. And about what we would do after the war. And how we would get married, and whether our husbands would love us. Our commanding officer laughed.

"Eh, you girls! You're good all around, but after the war men will be afraid to marry you. You've got good aim; you'll fling a plate at his head and kill him."

I met my husband during the war. We were in the same regiment. He was wounded twice, had a concussion. He went through the whole war, from beginning to end, and was in the military all his life afterward. Was there any need for me to explain to him what war was? Where I had come back from? How I was? Whenever I raise my voice, he either pays no attention or holds his peace. And I forgive him, too. I've also learned. We raised two children; they've both finished university. A son and a daughter.

What else can I tell you . . . So I was demobilized, came to Moscow. And to get home from Moscow I had to ride and then go several miles on foot. Now there's a subway, but then it was old cherry orchards and deep ravines. One ravine was very big, and I had to cross it. It was already dark when I got to it. Of course, I was afraid to go across that ravine. I stood there, not knowing what to do: either go back and wait for dawn, or pluck up my courage and risk it. Remembering it now, it's quite funny. I had the war behind me, what hadn't I seen, corpses and all the rest—and here I was afraid to cross a ravine. I remember to this day the smell of the corpses, mingled with the smell of cheap tobacco . . . But then I was still a young girl. Riding on the train . . . We were coming home from Germany . . . A mouse ran out of somebody's knapsack, and all our girls jumped up; the ones on the upper bunks came tumbling down, squealing. And there was a captain traveling with us; he was surprised: "You're all decorated, and you're afraid of mice."

Luckily for me, there was a truck passing by. I thought: I'll hitch a ride.

The truck stopped.

"I need to go to Diakovskoe," I shouted.

"I'm going to Diakovskoe myself." The young fellow opened the door.

I got into the cabin, he put my suitcase into the back, and off we went. He sees I'm in uniform, with decorations. He asks: "How many Germans did you kill?"

I say to him: "Seventy-five."

He says a bit mockingly: "Come on, you probably didn't lay eyes on a single one."

Then I recognized him: "Kolka Chizhov? Is it you? Remember, I helped you tie your red neckerchief?"

Before the war I had worked for a time as a Pioneer leader in my school.\*

"Maruska, it's you?"

"Me . . ."

"Really?" He stopped the truck.

"Take me home! What are you doing stopping in the middle of the road?" There were tears in my eyes. And in his, too, I could see. Such a meeting!

We drove up to my house, he ran with my suitcase to my mother, danced across the courtyard with this suitcase.

"Come quick, I've brought you your daughter!"

I can't forget . . . O-oh . . . How can I forget it?

I came back, and everything had to start over from the beginning. I had to learn to wear shoes; I'd spent three years at the front wearing boots. We were used to belts, always pulled tight, and now it seemed that clothes hung baggy on us, we felt somehow awkward. I looked at skirts with horror . . . at dresses . . . We didn't wear skirts at the front, only trousers. We used to wash them in the evening and sleep on them—that counted as ironing. True, they weren't quite dry, and they would freeze stiff in the frost. How do you learn to walk in a skirt? It was like my legs got tangled. I'd go out in a civilian dress and

\* The All-Union Pioneer Organization, for Soviet children from ten to fifteen years old, was founded in 1922. It was similar to Scout organizations in the West.