

*Representations of Femininity and Women in the Military  
in Russian and Soviet Cinema*

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The history of women in the Russian military is both longstanding and historically significant. Women have been present in combat roles in the military in Russia in various conflicts, in particular the First and Second World Wars, and continue to play an important role to this day. Many of these women served in diverse capacities and famous units throughout Russian and Soviet history. From the Women's Battalion of Death, the first official "battalion of women soldiers" sent "as combatants to the front" in 1917, to the renowned "all-female air regiments" that became known for their "precision and harassment bombing over German territory" in the Second World War (Stockdale, 2004, p. 78) (Goscilo, 2012, p. 8). Indeed, this trend continues to this day as women make up approximately ten percent (100,000) of the contemporary Russian armed forces (Mathers, 2006, p. 215). Although the role played by women throughout the history of the Soviet and Russian armed forces has been "significant", their contribution has regrettably been "subsequently undervalued or largely forgotten" (Goscilo, 2012, p. 7).

Furthermore, the representation of women in the Russian military and their femininity is generally quite stilted and stereotypical. Jennifer Mathers analyses at length the manner in which these women are represented in Russia as reinforcing traditional Russian notions of femininity. Within Russian media, these women are described as "flowers" and "fragile" while the authors comment upon their "beauty and their smiles ... nothing about how well they performed their duties" (Mathers, 2006, p. 221). Rather than being described in terms of their strength or heroism, as their male counterparts might be, these representations reinforce traditional notions of femininity, as they are "often praised especially for their feminine qualities", despite their performance and success in traditionally masculine roles (Mathers, 2006, p. 220). In Mathers' account of the representations of women in the military in contemporary Russian media, it is striking that the representation of these women is very stilted towards a stereotypical representation of femininity which downplays or ignores their military credentials.

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While academic attention has been paid to the representations of the femininity of women serving in the military, there has been comparatively less attention paid to the cinematic representations of the femininity of women in the military in Russia. Given the historical and cultural significance of women in the military in Russia, it is not surprising that there is a considerable number of Russian and Soviet films featuring women in military roles. The past decade has seen the release of numerous high-profile war films in Russia focussing on women in military roles during the World Wars, including several remakes of Soviet era films. These films represent a medium through which the general representation of women in the military in Russia is further developed, particularly with regard to the historical involvement of women in the Russian military. Mathers' exploration of issues of femininity and women serving in the contemporary Russian armed forces provides an insight into how women in the military are represented in the other segments of the Russian media. Mathers's approach provides a starting point to analyse these films and the way in which they represent women in the Russian military, particularly with regard to their relationship with femininity.

As there is currently a gap in the academic literature on the representations of femininity and women in the military in Russia in Russian and Soviet cinema, this thesis will seek to fill this gap. This thesis will analyse both historical and contemporary Russian and Soviet films and their representations of femininity and women in the Russian military in order to answer the research question: 'How has the representation of femininity in relation to women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema changed?' This thesis will examine six films across two distinct time periods, Soviet cinema of the 1970s and 1980s and Russian cinema of the 2010s, to analyse how women in the Russian military and their relationship with femininity are represented and therefore how these representations have changed over time.

In order to answer this research question, this thesis will first present an overview of relevant academic literature on this topic and establish the key concepts and analytical parameters that will be used in this thesis. The subsequent methodology chapter will then lay out the research methods that were utilised and explain the selection process for the analysed films. My findings will be presented and analysed

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across three analytical chapters. The first two analytical chapters will present and analyse the findings in relation to the representations of femininity and women in the military in the Soviet and Russian films respectively. The third analytical chapter will then further compare and contrast the findings of the prior two chapters and synthesise the results in order to answer the research question.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### Academic Literature on Gender, Femininity, and Masculinity

Before further discussing the academic literature, it is important to first establish the key concepts of gender, femininity, and masculinity which will be used in this thesis. Many academics, such as Connell and Ridgeway & Correll, believe that gender can be viewed as a social structure that functions to organise society (Connell, 1987) (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). This is further elaborated upon by Jennifer Silva as she explains that individuals in society, “as gendered beings”, “continually produce [them]selves, through social interactions and daily routines” and therefore “do not experience this construction as conscious, but as internalized, embodied and authentic” (Silva, 2008, p. 941). Mimi Schippers connects the social structure of gender to the concepts of femininity and masculinity by explaining that there are “contextually and culturally specific sets of meanings for what women and men are and should be (masculinity and femininity) and the mechanism (social practice) by which those meanings come to shape, influence, and transform social structure” (Schippers, 2007, p. 92). Bearing in mind that masculinity and femininity are merely associated with these culturally constructed sets of meaning as pointed out by Silva, however, allows for an understanding in which “instead of possessing or having masculinity, individuals move through and produce masculinity by engaging in masculine practices” (Schippers, 2007, p. 86). This understanding allows for the possibility of femininity and masculinity being challenged as it illuminates the important dynamic that both men and women can engage with both masculinity and femininity, which is crucial for this research. This thesis will therefore assume this understanding of gender as a social structure and femininity and masculinity as “contextually and culturally specific sets of meanings for what women and men are and should be” as defined by Schippers (Schippers, 2007, p. 92).

It is important to delve further into the interpretation of Schippers’ “sets of meanings” that make up masculinity and femininity (Schippers, 2007, p. 92). Various scholars agree that femininity and masculinity crystallise in relation to each other, “through interaction both among men, and between

men and women” (Meshcherkina, 2000). Schippers argues that “femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). She presents this definition as a direct counterpart to Connell’s definition of masculinity, which builds on the assumption of femininity in relation to masculinity being in a weaker position with relation to power and therefore associates masculinity with various traits serving to maintain that position (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). Masculinity therefore tends to be linked to expressions of power relating to strength, intelligence, “self-control and stoicism” (Silva, 2008, p. 941). This understanding, based on gender hierarchies, suggests that concepts such as gender, masculinity, and femininity are relational in nature. A pure binary manner of representing masculinity and femininity, however, has received its criticism as it heavily limits the concept of femininity. Carrie Paechter explains that due to the prevalent focus on (hegemonic) masculinity in influential works on gender theories, such as Connell’s combined works, femininity becomes “some sort of counterpart to masculinity, defined entirely in opposition and subordinate to it” (Paechter, 2018, p. 121). This could allow for the risk of femininity and masculinity being defined not by their own characteristics but in terms of what they are not.

The establishment of femininity and masculinity as their own categories, which is not by definition what the other is not, is therefore important. Silva conceptualises femininity in association to such traits as “attractiveness, sensitivity and motherhood” (Silva, 2008, p. 950). In addition to this, Mathers highlights various qualities and characteristics such as “observance” “attractiveness and accuracy” (Mathers, 2006, p. 220). Furthermore, she highlights qualities such as “elegance”, “fragility”, being “observant, efficient, and conscientious” as well as “benevolence in personal relations” and ability to bring “cleanliness, cosiness, and order” (Mathers, 2006, p. 220). These associations allow for a link to traditional gender roles related to femininity as these traits and associations evoke particular ideas about roles within families and societies, with being wives and mothers as the most prominent “traditional feminine roles” (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). Silva emphasises that these are not inherent but, as still “internalised and embodied” and therefore experienced “authentic” and are culturally recognisable as



traditional notions of femininity (Silva, 2008, p. 941). While aware of certain understandings of femininity and masculinity in more binary manners, this thesis will assume an understanding following Mathers and Silva, thereby perceiving femininity as its own category. There is a relation between femininity and masculinity, but this understanding allows for the ability to challenge and reinforce these “contextually and culturally specific sets of meanings for what women ... are and should be” (Schippers, 2007, p. 92).

This section has laid out the academic debate and key concepts of gender, femininity, and masculinity. These concepts are central to this thesis with femininity being the most important for analysing the representations of femininity and women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema. Recalling that femininity and masculinity are understood to be “contextually and culturally specific sets of meanings for what women and men are and should be”, the binary understandings of masculinity and femininity are utilised therefore as a starting point for defining these expectations and associations (Schippers, 2007, p. 92). This thesis will henceforth assume a broader understanding of femininity that not merely looks at femininity as something that masculinity is not, but as a category with its own features that are culturally and societally associated with women (even though, importantly, not by definition just assumed by women). It will assume an understanding of femininity as typically associated with traits such as “attractiveness, sensitivity and motherhood” (Silva, 2008, p. 951). Furthermore, close attention will be paid to references of traditional gender roles in relation to women as mothers and wives, as these roles play into senses of identity based on traditionally ‘feminine’ qualities such as being nurturing, sensitive, and attractive.

### Gender in the Soviet Union and in Contemporary Russia

For this thesis, it is also important to consider how Russia’s historical, literary, and societal development has impacted the conceptualisations of gender, femininity, and masculinity in Russia. In Russia, there is a prominent historical literary tradition of strong women. The prevalent “strong-woman’ motif”, represents Russian women in particular as very capable of assuming qualities linked to strength

particularly in times of crisis (Marsh, 2011, p. 13). A prominent example of this is the manner in which Nikolai Nekrasov constructs the women in his poem *Russian Women* (1872), in which they are explicitly linked to expressions of great strength and determination when faced with extreme circumstances. This strong motif of heroic women in Russian literature, Vera Sandomirsky Dunham emphasises, presents unparalleled “coherence and strength of the woman in a historical sequence” in Russian literary traditions both when comparing it to male representations in Russia and representations of gender in Western conceptualisations (Dunham, 1960, p. 462). Indeed, within this motif, “the strength of the [Russian] woman” is often greater than that of the men, who may act with “weakness” or “one-sidedness”, and is a unique trait of which Western woman are incapable (Dunham, 1960, p. 460). This is a far cry from the description of the “fragile” woman noted by Mathers and is further described by Dunham as “terrible perfection”, an unrealistic representation of femininity, which is exclusively available during times of crisis (Mathers, 2006, p. 221) (Dunham, 1960, p. 13).

Sarah Ashwin argues that gender functioned as a “key organising principle of the Soviet system” (Ashwin, 2000, p. 8). The Soviet system brought women more freedom, but not without cost as although women were “entitled to work and be financially independent”, “she should not forget bringing up the children and providing the centre of the nuclear family: the 'double' burden that many Russian women bear to this day” (Gillespie, 2003, pp. 84-85). Ashwin elaborates that in this system there was more focus on “the role of women” and the necessity of them fulfilling both traditional ‘feminine’ and traditional ‘masculine’ roles in society (Ashwin, 2000, p. 8). She explains furthermore that for women, “their role was defined as worker-mothers who had a duty to work, to produce future generations of workers, as well as to oversee the running of the household” (Ashwin, 2000, p. 8). Atwood explains how this leads to the “notion that Russia has traditionally been a matriarchal society” (Atwood, 1995, p. 515). She argues that “the mass entry of women into the workforce,” while still performing traditional feminine roles as well, in addition to the state having “taken over all other masculine functions, and, through the tight control it exerted over its citizens, destroyed their independence and autonomy” exacerbated the “blurring of gender roles” (Atwood, 1995, pp. 515, 519).

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The collapse of the Soviet system meant a major renegotiation of gender dynamics in Russia. Ashwin points out that work and the “traditional masculine roles of father and provider” were no longer state provided and that “men were expected to reassume the traditional ‘male’ responsibilities which have now been abandoned by the state” (Ashwin, 2000, p. 9). Valerie Sperling further explains how gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity have been renegotiated and re-energised and are now omnipresent in contemporary Russia in much more clear-cut stereotypical forms. She explains how the fall of communism and the rise of capitalism went hand in hand with the emergence of more explicit, extravagant, and sexualised images of both men and women in Russia, which stood in stark contrast to the previous ‘sexless’ images of the Soviet era (Sperling, 2015, p. 58). She illustrates that this renewed sexualisation of both men and women, highlighting “supremely pretty, slender-yet-busty women and cleft-chinned handsome men of chiselled physique”, stands in stark contrast to Soviet cinematic depictions which generally followed the “healthy, robust peasant or worker archetype” (Sperling, 2015, p. 58). The departure from traditional Soviet standards of beauty and the Western influence appears to have helped to spark the renegotiation and reimagination of day-to-day societal expectations of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Russia.

Another crucial element for this renegotiation and changes in gender dynamics in Russia is the new emphasis on masculinity in Russian society, most prominently represented by Vladimir Putin and his “masculine aura” (Sperling, 2015, p. 47). Several scholars such as Sperling, Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova have identified the political usage in Russia of gender stereotypes while “promulgating masculine images of Russia” as a legitimisation tool (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 23). Several scholars have referred to this tendency of a prominent focus on masculinity as the “remasculinisation of Russia” (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 23). Indeed, as illustrated by Sperling’s example of Putin’s birthday in 2012 being celebrated with “a gathering of young men from pro-Putin organisations” doing “public pull-ups in front of a portrait of the president” that this embracing of masculinity and “physical fitness in emulation of their leader” has taken hold and become a part of the public sphere (Sperling, 2015, p. 55). Contemporary Russia can then be viewed as very strongly gendered, with clear cut conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity. This results in a socio-political context and society in

which very clear cut and starkly contrasted (and often sexualised) images of ‘typically’ male and female gender types are represented. Based on this, it can be expected that gender representations from the contemporary Russian context may put more emphasis on clear-cut conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity.

#### Academic Literature on Gender and the Military

As this thesis sets out to analyse the representations of femininity and women in the military in films, it is important to be aware that the military sphere is very closely tied to associations with masculinity in the popular imagination. Helena Goscilo argue that both the concepts of war and the military are generally perceived as a “male affair” (Goscilo, 2012, pp. 1-2). Silva, while discussing female soldiers, argues that the military sphere “categorically rejects prevailing models of femininity” and instead “form[s] a concept of soldier that is distinctly different from our cultural understandings of femininity as caring, connection and compromise” (Silva, 2008, p. 941). Goscilo, however, refutes “the myth of the mutually exclusive nature of war and motherhood” by providing numerous examples of women in official military roles, as well as unofficial partisans during war times, while highlighting her belief that women’s contributions were seen nowhere “more forcefully than on the Eastern Front” (Goscilo, 2012, pp. 4-5 & 7). When focussing on the Russian context in this regard, she draws attention to the fact that, despite numerous examples of women’s presence in this sphere, “women’s contribution ... was significant, though subsequently undervalued or largely forgotten” (Goscilo, 2012, p. 7). She links this to the strong intertwining of masculinity and the military sphere, also present in the Russian context as she explains that “despite the Soviet Union’s pragmatic reliance on female combatants in the Second World War, the Russian military remains a male domain in a society indentured to a rhetoric that essentialises femininity” (Goscilo, 2012, p. 15).

Jennifer Silva’s research into the ‘real life’ experience of military women and their relation to femininity and their military roles in the United States, provides further insight into the complexities of women in relation to their femininity. Silva explains that the military as an institution specifically “constructs

soldiering, both implicitly and explicitly, as a predominantly male and masculine activity” (Silva, 2008, p. 940). Kathy Abrams further elaborates on this point by arguing that the military is “conceived by many as the symbol of and training ground for traditional notions of masculinity” (Abrams, 1993, p. 217). Jennifer Mathers also contributes that military institutions “rely on and perpetuate beliefs about gender, and they depend on men and women to accept, internalise, and act on those beliefs” (Mathers, 2013, p. 124). Building upon her statement that “the military demands physically and mentally tough, goal-oriented, aggressive soldiers with skills of violence”, Silva argues the military sphere could potentially be empowering for women and an environment in which traditional notions can be challenged (Silva, 2008, p. 937). She states specifically that “if performing gender in culturally recognizable ways is crucial to the conception of one's deepest self, as well as essential to forming meaningful interactions with others, the extent to which military women can adopt traditionally non-feminine behaviours and characteristics and still retain their identities as women – as themselves - may be called into question” (Silva, 2008, p. 938). She elaborates on this by building upon the work of Melissa Herbert who argued that these women in the military would be “held accountable as women and as soldiers” by demonstrating “culturally-defined masculine qualities such as self-control and stoicism, while also negotiating cultural definitions of femininity that have provided them with stable gender identities throughout their lives” (Herbert, 1998, p. 13) (Silva, 2008, p. 941). This active participation in femininity, both reinforcing and challenging it, recalls Judith Butler’s understanding of gender as “performative” and “manifested through a sustained set of acts” rather than through a person’s “internal essence” (Butler, 2006, p. xv). Silva ultimately perceives the military as both an opportunity to challenge femininity but also a challenge to femininity. It is a forum in which women can challenge traditional gender norms, but it may inhibit their ability to engage with femininity in more traditional ways. This internal conflict that Silva has described is an important point that will be considered in the analytical chapters when considering the conflicts that the women in the military face in the analysed films.

Mathers provides insight into the media representations of femininity and women in the military in Russia as she assessed “whether traditional notions of femininity are being reinforced or challenged”

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(Mathers, 2006, p. 221). Despite the significant number of women in contemporary Russia's armed forces, they are often exclusively "praised for their feminine qualities" and not their military actions or "how well they performed their duties" (Mathers, 2006, pp. 220-221). She notes that they are "rarely credited with courage, decisiveness, physical strength, strength of character or ability to lead others" but instead, credited with particular things related to femininity such as "meticulousness, punctuality and accuracy" and their "beauty and their smiles" (Mathers, 2006, p. 220 & 221). This then suggests that Russian representations present women in the military in very stereotypically feminine manners, despite their presence in 'traditionally masculine' roles. Mathers' research and findings form a key component for this thesis, as it will examine whether this representation of femininity and women in the military in Russia holds for their representation in films. The method of assessing whether femininity is reinforced or challenged will be utilised as the primary method of analysis in this thesis.

### The Representation of Women in 'Masculine Roles' in (Russian) Cinema

As stated earlier, there is a gap in the academic literature with regards to the representation of femininity and women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema. This thesis therefore will review the work of scholars in a wider sense, in relation to the representation of women in 'masculine roles' in Russian cinema and American representation of women in military roles. Lynne Atwood provides some insight with her analysis of Russian mafia films. She argues that these cinematic representations can be viewed as "a reflection of a process that seeks to 'masculinise' post-Soviet society as men are released from the supposed feminising influence of state socialism" (Atwood, 1995, p. 514). Atwood draws parallels between her research on this tendency in the Russian films with a similar tendency in the United States as explored by Susan Jeffords, in which Jeffords describes the fascination of filmmakers and writers with the Vietnam war, "long after the war was over" as participating in "a large scale regeneration of the interests, values and projects of patriarchy" (Atwood, 1995, p. 514) (Jeffords, 1989, p. xi). Along the same lines, Atwood explains that war films can be seen as a tool for remasculinisation as "representations of war constitute an affirmation of masculinity, a celebration of traditional masculine traits" (Atwood, 1995, p. 514). To link this to contemporary Russia, the emergence of contemporary

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war films, revisiting the great wars of the past, would make sense in the gendered context of contemporary Russia. In Atwood's research on the representation of women in mafia films, she concludes that at the end of these films the "female gang members" are "firmly back in the domestic sphere" (Atwood, 1995, p. 519). From this, Atwood concludes there is a visible desire for a return to "more clear-cut gender roles", again in opposition to the "Soviet Union's blurring of gender roles" (Atwood, 1995, p. 519).

The limited availability of academic literature on the representation of femininity and women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema leads to this section turning to research based on the same subject, but in the context of the cinema of the United States. Stacie Furia and Denise Bielby provide valuable insights into the representation of femininity and women in the military based on their study on this topic in American films. Furia and Bielby found that the representation of women in the military "can be divided into three subcategories: the woman who is a failure as a soldier but successfully performs her femininity; the woman who is a successful soldier but fails at some or all aspects of heteronormative femininity; and the rarest, the woman who succeeds both as a soldier and as a feminine woman, although this usually includes some form of limitation either in femininity or successful soldiering" (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 214). The latter, with attention to the "precarious position military women hold institutionally and the liability this creates for them personally as individuals and as women attempting to bridge feminine and masculine categories", was more prominent in the contemporary films they analysed (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). They found that in these contemporary films, the gendered representations had become more complex, as these showed more nuanced manoeuvring of women in the military between "their masculine positions in the military and their feminine identities as wives, mothers, and other traditional feminine roles" (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). Furia and Bielby highlighted, furthermore, the potential of portrayals of women in the military in film reflecting "only part of a military woman's identity" (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 224). They explain that these either highlight "the military woman's feminine identity, thus undermining her successful involvement in the military" or "the military woman's masculine identity, thus undermining her femininity and consequently her status and claim on womanhood" (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 224). Indeed, their

research was conducted along the dichotomy of “whether the female characters engaged in traditionally feminine activities and whether they engaged in traditionally masculine ones” in order to analyse the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ identities of the women (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 213). Furia and Bielby also included the emphasis on “gender indicators”, as either masculine or feminine, as physical signifiers related to masculinity and femininity, such as “length of hair, posture”, “make up” and “physique” (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 213). This dichotomy and analytical approach is a further interesting method by which the representations of femininity and women in the military can be analysed. This thesis will employ aspects of Furia and Bielby’s approach in order to analyse the ways in which the women challenge and reinforce their femininity, including through engaging in traditionally feminine and masculine activities.

This chapter has addressed the key concepts and topics with which this thesis will engage and has presented an overview of the pre-existing academic literature on these topics. As mentioned, this thesis will seek to fill a gap in the academic literature by addressing the research question of ‘How has the representation of femininity in relation to women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema changed?’ In the following chapter, I will explain the research methods that I have used in order to answer this question.



### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

In the previous chapter, the key concepts of gender, femininity, and masculinity were defined for the purposes of this thesis. In order to address the research question of ‘How has the representation of femininity in relation to women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema changed?’, I will first explain my theoretical basis and methodology.

Considering Mathers’ analysis of the media representation of femininity and women soldiers in the Russian armed forces, I believe that my analysis of the representation of femininity and women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema would help to fill a gap in the existing literature. To this end, I will utilise Mathers’ model of analysis which sought to assess “whether traditional notions of femininity are being reinforced or challenged” (Mathers, 2006, p. 221). My theoretical basis for understanding femininity is rooted in Silva and Mathers’ understanding of femininity as a distinct identity, rather than merely being what masculinity is not. Furthermore, through Mathers’ analytical framework of femininity being ‘reinforced’ or ‘challenged’ I will analyse the way in which the women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema are represented in relation to femininity. This approach works well together with Silva’s question about “the extent to which military women can adopt traditionally non-feminine behaviours and characteristics and still retain their identities as women”, as it highlights the internal conflict surrounding femininity in traditionally masculine roles (Silva, 2008, p. 938). With this as my theoretical approach, I will now explain my methodological approach to this research.

As mentioned previously, I will be focussing upon the representation of femininity and women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema. Cinema, as explained by Furia and Bielby, “is an embodiment in form of culturally shared significance, sometimes greatly idealised, and as a popular medium that carries matters of cultural relevance it draws upon symbols that are reliably and widely apprehended by the public” (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 222). This underlines the importance of cinema for forming and representing social norms and expectations, particularly on topics such as gender, as “ongoing insecurities about gender transcendence and gender transgressions ... find their way into film as well”

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(Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 222). The contemporary and historical attitudes towards gender, femininity, and masculinity in Russia and the Soviet Union will be reflected within the medium of cinema, even in films depicting historical events. Indeed, Gillespie summarises this point by arguing that “the historical film is rarely, if ever a true representation of the past” as it tries to be “in tune with the modern consciousness” (Gillespie, 2003, p. 58). My approach to the analysis of the films will primarily be based on a close reading of the films as a whole, considering the contemporary social attitudes and norms in Russia and the Soviet Union, and particular scenes which demonstrate the representations of femininity and women in the military. In order to help my analysis and to demonstrate my points, I have included some stills from the films to help illustrate my points during my analysis.

I will be analysing films from two time periods: the 1970s and 1980s in Soviet cinema and 2010s Russian cinema. The film selection primarily focussed on finding films with female main characters or principally with a female cast in order to find films with enough primary source material to answer the question. When selecting the films to analyse, I decided to select three films for each time period. My selections include two Soviet era films which have had contemporary Russian remakes. This allows for a direct comparison between the representations of women in the military and their relation to femininity across the two time periods. Firstly, I chose to analyse both the original version of *А зори здесь тихие* (*The Dawns Here Are Quiet*) (1972) and the contemporary remake *А зори здесь тихие* (*The Dawns Here Are Quiet*) (2015). Secondly, I chose to analyse both the original *В небе ночные ведьмы* (*Night Witches in the Sky*) (1981) and its contemporary counterpart *Ночные ласточки* (*Night Swallows*) (2012). In addition to these two sets of films, I have also chosen to analyse a third film for each time period which represents a more unique perspective on women in the military in Russia and the Soviet Union. The film *Снайперы* (*Snipers*) (1985) is unique in that it follows a completely different sort of protagonist to the other films, particularly as the central character is a female ethnic Kazakh sniper in Red Army in the Second World War. Furthermore, I will also analyse the First World War set *Батальонъ* (*Battalion*) (2015) which expands the scope of this thesis to include representations of femininity and women in the military in Russia in contexts other than the Second World War. All of these films are available on YouTube with most of the 2010s Russian films existing as extended, multi-

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part versions of the films originally shown on domestic Russian television. The quotations from the films are based upon my own translation of the original Russian, and in one instance German, language dialogue. I believe that analysing six films across two time periods which have both similarities and differences will provide much evidence and differing results in order to give a better and more insightful answer to the research question.

In this chapter, I have explained the theoretical approach and methodology for this thesis. In the following chapter, I will present and analyse my findings on the representation of femininity and women in the military in Soviet cinema.

**Chapter 4: Representation of Femininity and Women in the Military in Soviet Cinema**

This chapter will analyse the way in which femininity and women in the military are represented in Soviet cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, based on the three selected Soviet war films mentioned previously. The analysis in this chapter will be structured around Mathers' approach of assessing "whether traditional notions of femininity are being reinforced or challenged" (Mathers, 2006, p. 221). Each section will cover one film and analyse instances in which women in the military challenge and reinforce their femininity.

*А зорю здесь тихие (The Dawns Here Are Quiet), 1972*

*The Dawns Here Are Quiet* is a 1972 film based on the novel by Boris Vasilyev. Set in a small town in Karelia during the Second World War, the film starts with Senior Sergeant Fedot Vaskov being fed up with his male anti-aircraft gunners getting drunk and fooling around with local girls. At his request for a regiment of soldiers who are well behaved and disciplined, he is, to his surprise, sent an all-female regiment. When German soldiers are discovered in the nearby forest, Sergeant Vaskov selects five of the women, Rita Osyanina, Zhenya Komelkova, Lisa Brichkina, Sonya Gurvich, and Ghalya Chetvertak, to come along with him on a mission to take out the German invaders.

The female protagonists of *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* challenge their femininity through their successes in the traditionally masculine sphere of the military. The women in this film are represented as relatively skilled and capable in their military roles, despite their inexperience. After the initial surprise of the sergeant of being presented with an all-female regiment, the women quickly prove themselves to be capable in their military roles. During an air raid at night, they are shown to react promptly and are highly disciplined under the command of their female unit commander. Meanwhile, the male sergeant is shown to be disorientated and ends up hiding with civilians, from where he loudly criticises the actions of the women. He is scolded by an old woman who angrily tells him, "you know better? The girls are fighting and you are here hiding in a hole, hero!" (Pt. 1, 0:17:44). The women are

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portrayed here as very determined and “goal-oriented”, both which are characterised by Silva as masculine traits linked to conceptualisations of soldiers (Silva, 2008, pp. 937, 941). Furthermore, this recalls the ‘strong-woman’ motif where women work well in times of crisis while male characters show “weakness” (Dunham, 1960, p. 460).

Feminine traits that do not fit in with the traditional masculine idea of soldiers, such as sensitivity and being empathetic, are rejected in several instances in this film. Rita, for instance, snaps at Zhenya in order for her to stop crying when they are on their assignment (Pt. 2, 00:30:00). In this, Rita is shown to adopt “culturally-defined masculine qualities such as self-control and stoicism” and is shown also to expect this from her fellow female soldiers (Silva, 2008, p. 941). Keeping in mind that “soldiering” is generally constructed “as a predominantly male and masculine activity”, this representation of women as able to assume ‘masculine traits’ linked to the military sphere, particularly the stoicism in the face of death, presents a challenge to their femininity and traditional feminine values, such as sympathy and empathy (Silva, 2008, p. 940). The challenging of femininity in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* is reminiscent of Silva and Butler’s idea of ‘performing’ gender. The women are taking part and succeeding in traditionally masculine military roles but also actively adopting traditionally masculine traits, such as stoicism, and rejecting traditionally feminine traits. This further emphasises the point of Furia and Bielby that success within the masculine military sphere can come at a cost to the traditionally feminine identities of women in the military.

*The Dawns Here Are Quiet* also shows the female protagonists reinforcing their femininity through their desire to adhere to traditionally feminine gender norms and expectations, in particular the desire to be wives and mothers. The main literary device utilised for this are flashbacks which the women are shown to have when they are not on duty. These flashbacks, are shown in a dreamy and romantic manner, thus representing the extent to which these desires are deep-seated but, perhaps for these women, unattainable. Rita, for instance, is shown to daydream about a romanticised ideal of her past domestic life with her child and late husband (Pt. 1, 00:14:16). She visualises herself as the nicely dressed housewife who is excited to greet her husband when he comes back home. The simple visuals

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of the scene, juxtaposing her simple outfit to his military uniform, underscore her desire to leave her military life behind and re-embrace her traditional femininity.



*Rita's dreamy 'flashback' to a happier, traditional domestic life with husband and child.*



*Ghalya retreats to a fairy tale fantasy.*

While many of the flashbacks are centred around the women visualising themselves as fitting into the most prominent “traditional feminine roles” of being mothers and wives, others take on more of a fantasy aspect (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). Ghalya, for instance, imagines herself in a more ‘fairy

tale' position with an elaborate dress, horse drawn carriage and a 'Prince Charming'. This is an extreme rejection of her military reality and represents a strong desire for traditionally feminine fairy tale tropes. This almost recalls Mathers' findings of female soldiers being described as "fragile" as Ghaliya retreats from the masculine world of the military to an over-idealised fairy tale version of femininity (Mathers, 2006, p. 221). These 'flashbacks' are therefore more instances where the audience is shown the deep desires of these women rather than actual recollections of their pasts. They reveal that although the women are challenging their femininity through participating in masculine military activities, they long for more traditionally feminine gender roles and tropes.

Furthermore, the women are shown to comfortably and naturally engage with feminine conduct and feminine activities. In the evenings, it shows them as women amongst each other that get excited about things such as hair, make-up, and fashion. They even are shown to organise a fashion show and do a make-over of one of the women who was insecure about her looks. The traditionally feminine trait of "attractiveness" is present within this representation as an important motive for how they chose to utilise their time while not on duty (Silva, 2008, p. 950). The film presents an image of the women as being very in touch with their emotions, which fits in with "our cultural understandings of femininity as caring, connection and compromise" (Silva, 2008, p. 941). Despite rejections of such behaviour while engaged in military activities, the women are represented to share their feelings, emotions, and concerns with one another while off duty. They are shown to be empathetic and comfort each other when needed, for instance when they share their personal stories of how they ended up in these military roles. This demonstrates the fact that the women are able to successfully practice feminine activities and traits while also participating in the military. Their representation as naturally engaging in these "traditionally feminine activities" and behaving following feminine conduct therefore presents them as strongly reinforcing their femininity (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 213).

In *The Dawns Here Are Quiet*, the women are shown as both challenging and reinforcing their femininity. On the one hand, the female characters are represented as capable soldiers, able to assume traits linked to masculinity, such as stoicism, that based on traditional understandings of femininity

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would not fit into their stereotypical representations, and further reject certain feminine traits, such as sensitivity. On the other hand, the women are shown engaging with and reinforcing their femininity while off duty. It is made clear that the women are not limited in relation to “their identities as women” in this representation (Silva, 2008, p. 937). The representation of Rita serves as a prime example as she is emphasised to be a caring mother while she is simultaneously shown to be able to adopt and adapt to certain masculine traits while performing masculine activities in the military. Their abilities to both reinforce and challenge femininity are shown in this manner to not be mutually exclusive. This representation of women in the military who can be successful in the masculine military sphere while also successfully engaging with their femininity recalls Furia and Bielby’s categorisation of the “woman who succeeds both as a soldier and as a feminine woman, although this usually includes some form of limitation either in femininity or successful soldiering” (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 214). The limitations are that their desires for traditionally feminine gender roles, such as being wives and mothers, have either been destroyed or delayed by war and their duties as soldiers.

### *В небе ночные ведьмы (Night Witches in the Sky), 1981*

*Night Witches in the Sky* focusses on the 588<sup>th</sup> Night Bomber Aviation Regiment during the Second World War. This all-female regiment was nicknamed ‘Night Witches’ by the Germans as they “specialised in precision and harassment bombing over German territory” mostly by night (Goscilo, 2012, p. 8). The film, directed by Evgenia Zhigulenko who herself served in this regiment, tells the story of the fictional Oksana Zakharchenko and Galina Polikarpova, who can be seen as representative of the many young women who joined this regiment, and their achievements as pilots. In addition to this, the older female commanders within the regiment play an important role in guiding these young women in their new military roles. When Oksana and Galina save a young boy named Fedor from German tanks invading his village, his presence alters the dynamics in the military camp as he awakens some motherly feelings within the women.



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Much as in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet*, the female protagonists of *Night Witches in the Sky* are shown to challenge their femininity through success in the masculine military activities. The women are shown to be exceptionally skilled in their military roles as pilots. The film provides a lot of screen time for spectacular scenes of the pilots flying and pulling off tricky manoeuvres, successfully avoiding collisions, and taking down enemy planes while also saving civilians from the oncoming enemies (00:19:45). There is a lot of emphasis on their heroic flights and skills in their roles as pilots, which is shown to be enabled by the skilful and elaborate planning of the female commanders. They are, in this context, all presented as highly “goal-orientated” and determined to succeed in these military roles (Silva, 2008, p. 937). It is important to note that women are present across all ranks in the regiment and are also shown to be in charge of all strategic planning and organising. In this manner the women are shown to be as capable in these traditionally masculine roles which further challenges the expectations of women not fitting into this military sphere. This representation, with male characters only represented in supporting and more passive roles, challenges ideas of the military as “a predominantly male and masculine activity” (Silva, 2008, p. 940). The film even contains an instance of a reversal of traditional gender roles, with Galina’s fiancé staying with Fedor as she fulfils her duties as pilot while he comforts Fedor saying “she will be back” and they proudly look up at the sky (01:14:15).

Furthermore, references to femininity are shown to be rejected in the military context as it is used in a demeaning manner in order to indicate it has no place within the military context. The female commanders tell the other women off for playing with Fedor by saying that “they did not come here to play with dolls” (00:24:32). The female commanders are represented as adopting and encouraging masculine traits from their female pilots, in particular they encourage the women to be “goal-oriented”, stoic, and to have “self-control” (Silva, 2008, pp. 937, 941). This reinforces an image of feminine conduct having no place within the masculine military context. This is emphasised by one of the female commanders saying that “once the war ends you will all have sons” (00:22:55). This presents an image in which this very inherent “traditional feminine role” is actively rejected (albeit by postponing) in order to remain focussed on their military tasks (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). This representation is particularly striking as we see an all-female regiment which actively encourages the adoption of

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masculine military traits and rejects traditional feminine traits and norms. This is reminiscent of Mathers' noting that militaries "rely on and perpetuate beliefs about gender, and they depend on men and women to accept, internalise, and act on those beliefs" (Mathers, 2013, p. 124).

The film also depicts the female characters as having inherent and deep-seated desires to reinforce their femininity, although this is mostly linked to the younger generation of women in this film. The character of Fedor is shown to evoke strong motherly feelings that cannot be suppressed, particularly in Oksana. Although she is shown as a capable and successful pilot, she is portrayed and explicitly referred to as a mother figure to Fedor. Indeed, fellow pilots tell the commander that "Oksana is like a mother to him" (00:23:00). She is shown to be very protective of him, and calls out others for not taking the task of his care as seriously as she does. Oksana for instance, says to Galina "for you he is like a toy, but for me he is like a son" (00:49:20). The emotions and protectiveness around Fedor, however, are shown to be so strong and it reinforces the traditional feminine norm of women taking on these "traditional feminine roles of taking care of children" (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). In this manner, the film reinforces the representation of the women conforming to traditional femininity through their role as a mother.

Furthermore, engaging with feminine activities in relation to "attractiveness" and a "desire to be the object of masculine desire" are also present in this film (Silva, 2008, p. 950) (Schippers, 2007, p. 95). Galina is shown sitting in a flower field, with her hair done up with improvised hair curlers while happily and dreamily doing her make-up after she has just received a letter from her boyfriend which she is holding close to her (00:44:45). This demonstrates that she still engages with and practices feminine activities, particularly related to her appearance. What is striking is that she does this while in uniform which therefore demonstrates that her masculine activities in the military do not completely stop her from also taking part in feminine activities. This reinforces a representation that affirms that she can both be a successful, skilful pilot and a feminine woman who makes herself look pretty in anticipation of a rendezvous with her fiancé, just as Oksana is shown to be both a skilful pilot and a mother figure.

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*Night Witches in the Sky* includes both representations of women challenging femininity and reinforcing their femininity. The challenging of femininity in the military sphere is very present across the representation of all the women in the regiment as they successfully fulfil various military roles and, in the case of the commanders, ensure that masculine traits are prioritised over traditionally feminine traits. The different generations of women and military ranks represented provide somewhat different representations in regards to conforming with femininity. The older women in their capacity as commanders are somewhat more limited in their engagement with femininity as they are almost exclusively depicted in their military roles and actively downplaying femininity in relation to the younger women. The relation to femininity of the younger women is relatively uncomplicated as they are shown to seamlessly be able to move between these two elements of their identities as military women: between “the military woman’s feminine identity” and “the military woman’s masculine identity” (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 224). Just as in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet*, the combination of successful engagement with their roles as soldiers and traditional femininity are represented as not mutually exclusive.

### *Снайперы (Snipers)*, 1985

*Snipers* tells the story of Aliya Moldagulova, an ethnic Kazakh woman who voluntarily joined the Red Army during the Second World War. She received the titles of Hero of the Soviet Union and has since become an important national figure and symbol for Kazakhstan (Nuketaeva, Kanagatova, Khan, Kylyshbayeva, & Bektenova, 2012, p. 1153). The film shows how she, against all odds and institutional pushback, becomes a sniper and served before dying on front lines of the Baltic Front.

As with the other analysed films, challenging femininity is an important dynamic throughout as the female soldiers prove themselves capable in their military roles. The military sphere is in this film more strongly portrayed as a “male affair”, to a much greater extent than in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* or in *Night Witches in the Sky* (Goscilo, 2012, pp. 1-2). The women are actively discriminated against and assumed to be incapable of succeeding in masculine military activities. Indeed, a male soldier tells

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Aliya, when she expresses her frustration about not being taken along on assignment, “rightly so, you need us to save you” (00:11:18). Furthermore, the female soldiers are told that “transmitting is not a job for women ... I offer you for the last time a job somewhere at the headquarters or medical battalion” (00:06:55). Rather than being offered front line positions, the women are offered jobs in administrative or medical positions. Indeed, the idea that women “need us [men] to save you” would appear to reinforce femininity, albeit in a regressive way suggesting that women are incapable of taking part in masculine activities. Aliya, however, challenges her femininity and the preconceptions of the military through her “mentally tough” and “goal-oriented” determination to succeed as a woman in the military (Silva, 2008, p. 937). These traditionally masculine traits are presented as necessary for her to adopt to push through the gendered boundaries of the military.



*Aliya excels in her role as a sniper.*

Once Aliya has achieved her goal of becoming a sniper, the film emphasises her success in the role. We are shown that she has amassed a high number of confirmed kills, further emphasising her success as a sniper. Aliya adopts the role of the leading female figure in pushing these gendered boundaries and,

following in her footsteps, more women are shown to be able to take up the role of a sniper. Furia and Bielby explained how “provisional acceptance” of women in military roles, with “every woman [having] to prove herself anew in each new situation” is a common feature in both the representation of women in military roles in film and in “the experiences of many real life military women” (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 221). Through the emphasis on the Aliya’s capabilities of assuming these masculine traits and succeeding through her hard work and skill in these military roles, *Snipers* challenges femininity.

In *Snipers*, Aliya is shown to have internal conflicts with her femininity and reinforces her femininity to a lesser extent than the women in the other films. During a scene in which Aliya shares painful memories of her pre-war life, we see her internal desire of conforming to traditional feminine gender roles. These painful memories are rooted in an inability to have children and her boyfriend abandoning her for that reason. She is shown to experience deep sadness and disappointment about her self-perceived ‘failing’ in this regard as a woman, which is rooted in the importance of “motherhood” and “attractiveness” as traditional feminine norms and traits (Silva, 2008, p. 950). Indeed, her disappointment and sadness speak to her desire to conform to femininity and to engage with traditionally feminine gender norms despite her desire to perform masculinity activities and her success in the military. Aliya could be characterised by Furia and Bielby as “the woman who is a successful soldier but fails at some or all aspects of heteronormative femininity”, despite her desire to participate and succeed in both of these activities (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 214). *Snipers* is therefore the unique case amongst the Soviet examples in which women in the military are shown to not successfully participate in both masculine and feminine activities.

The representation of femininity and women in the military in *Snipers* is the most unbalanced of the examples from the Soviet era. Aliya is perhaps the most successful in challenging her femininity and the preconceptions of women in a highly masculine military. However, she is shown to be the least successful at reinforcing her femininity despite her desires for a traditional feminine gender role as wife and mother. This representation is almost an extreme example of the ‘strong-woman’ motif as Aliya

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became an exemplary sniper in a time of a crisis and paved the way for other women to take part in particular roles in the military which had not been accessible to women beforehand. Unlike the ‘strong-woman’ motif, however, Aliya does not get to reinforce her femininity after the crisis as she dies in the line of duty. Her depiction goes beyond challenging femininity and engaging with masculinity as she becomes a national symbol for Kazakhstan and the Soviet Union.

### Preliminary Conclusions

The representation of femininity and women in the military in Soviet cinema has shown that women are capable of taking on and succeeding in the masculine activities of the military. Indeed, the women are able to perform as “both women and soldiers” (Silva, 2008, p. 941). The representation in Soviet cinema does not exclude the female soldiers from participating in either masculine or feminine activities, although the feminine activities are limited to an extent by the circumstances of war. The key differences between the films relates more to the extent to which the women still reinforce their femininity during their military service.

The representation of women in the military in all three films demonstrates that the women challenge femininity by engaging and succeeding in masculine military activities. The women are all skilful and determined in their roles as soldiers, pilots, and snipers. Their representations are not undermined as they are represented as capable and deserving of the same respect as male counterparts. We do see that the masculine traits, such as stoicism, have to be reinforced by colleagues or superiors but the women are capable of performing these traits and therefore succeeding in these roles. Importantly, the engagement with masculine activities and traits does not mean that the women become more masculine but it demonstrates that there is space for women to participate and succeed in these masculine spheres.

Within the Soviet films, we see that femininity is reinforced to an extent in all of the analysed films. Femininity is often compartmentalised and expressed while the women are off duty, whereas masculine activities and traits dominate their active time in the military. The notion of femininity which is

reinforced is quite a traditional version of femininity. The women in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* and *Night Witches in the Sky* enjoy traditionally feminine activities such as doing their hair and make-up. The traditional feminine gender norms of being a wife and mother are particularly important for the representations of the women in all of the films who desire these traditional domestic lives. Even Aliya, who reinforces her femininity comparatively less, feels a deep sadness that she cannot participate in the role of a wife and mother. The femininity of the women is reinforced through both their traditionally feminine activities, but also through their desire to participate in feminine activities and fulfil feminine gender norms.

The representation of femininity and women in the military in Soviet cinema can be seen to embody the ‘strong-woman’ motif mentioned previously. The women are able to act in a time of crisis and are capable soldiers but they long for a return to the traditional feminine gender norms of being a wife and mother once normality returns. This is quite balanced in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* and *Night Witches in the Sky* but *Snipers* leans more towards emphasising challenging femininity. For the most part, the representation of women in the military demonstrates that they are expected to assume “culturally-defined masculine qualities such as self-control and stoicism, while also negotiating cultural definitions of femininity” (Silva, 2008, p. 941). This is perhaps best represented by Oksana in *Night Witches in the Sky* who takes on both the role of a mother figure and a pilot thereby “successfully navigate between their masculine positions in the military and their feminine identities as wives, mothers, and other traditional feminine roles” (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). Their feminine identities and participation in masculine activities is therefore not irreconcilable but requires active participation from the women in order to navigate their situation.

The following chapter will turn to presenting findings in relation to the representation of femininity and women in the military in contemporary Russian cinema.

**Chapter 5: Representation of Femininity and Women in the Military in Russian Cinema**

This chapter will analyse the way in which femininity and women in the military are represented in Russian cinema of the 2010s, based on the three selected Russian war films mentioned previously. The analysis in this chapter will be structured around Mathers' approach of assessing "whether traditional notions of femininity are being reinforced or challenged" (Mathers, 2006, p. 221). Each section will cover one film and analyse instances in which women in the military challenge and reinforce their femininity.

*А зори здесь тихие (The Dawns Here Are Quiet), 2015*

As a "direct remake", *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* is an "explicit re-rendering" of the 1972 original film as it maintains the same plot and characters (Donovan, 2017, p. 24). The principle differences between the 2015 and original 1972 version include an added narrator, more in-depth and realistic flashbacks to provide the background stories of the main characters, and small differences in dialogue.

The women in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* challenge femininity through their participation in the masculine military roles. The male sergeant is represented as initially doubtful and concerned about the abilities of his new soldiers when he discovers they are all women. This is demonstrated by his concerned question to the female commander, "have any of you seen battle, except you?", to which she assures him confidently, "we are all seasoned soldiers, comrade sergeant" (Pt. 1, 00:12:30). The female soldiers assure the male sergeant of their capabilities in this traditionally masculine military role. In the heat of action, the women are further shown to prove themselves skilled in the role of anti-aircraft (AA) gunners. In contrast to the male sergeant, who is shown unprepared for the air raid and hops out of his cabin wearing only one boot, the women are shown to respond promptly and adequately, fully in uniform (00:26:03). The film presents the women in this manner as skilful, disciplined soldiers, against initial doubts based on their gender as even the male sergeant, in awe of their skills, whispers to himself: "way to go girls" (Pt. 1, 00:27:46). Even though their initial appearances made the male sergeant doubt



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their abilities, they quickly assert themselves as capable in this military engagement. In close combat encounters they may be presented as less skilled, mostly due to a lack of experience, but are generally as brave, assertive, and determined soldiers. This is further demonstrated by the heroic actions of Zhenya who saves the male sergeant from a German soldier attempting to stab him (Pt. 3, 00:35:00).

Furthermore, femininity is challenged through the film's emphasis on the physical strength and determination of the women. The male sergeant is shown to be surprised by the women's dedication to building their own barracks because "the AA Guys just stayed in village", to which the female commander reaffirms that they "are not the AA guys, but the AA women" (Pt. 1, 00:12:30). The women are shown to work all night to build their own beds and furniture for the barracks, and are in this manner presented as tough, pro-active, and assertive rather than the stereotypically feminine traits of being "weak" or "passive" (Silva, 2008, p. 954). In addition to this, feminine conduct such as sensitivity is at certain instances rejected with Rita telling Zhenya and Lisa to "cut it out!" when they get emotional at the sight of Sonya being wounded (Pt. 3, 00:38:00). They are instead portrayed as required to assume traits, usually associated with masculinity such as toughness, stoicism, and strength, in addition to needing to distance themselves from femininity in this military context. Therefore, femininity is challenged through engagement with masculine traits and activities in conjunction with a rejection of some aspects of femininity.

*The Dawns Here Are Quiet* also represents women reinforcing their femininity in several manners. First of all, it portrays the female characters as ultimately desiring lives as wives and mothers. Instead of the dreamy sequences of the 1972 version, the women's personal histories are highly detailed, realistic scenes accompanied by the all-knowing narrator elaborating on the more painful details of these histories. In this manner, the viewer is reminded of their roles before the war which destroyed their normal lives as wives, girlfriends, and mothers. Rita, for instance, recalls the destruction of her home and domestic life by the invading German tanks which kill her husband who was serving in the military. The women are shown to melancholically think back to these happier pre-war times throughout the

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film, thereby reinforcing their desires to conform to such traditional feminine gender roles, and ultimately reinforces a sense of sadness in their inability to fully experience this due to the war.

Furthermore, the female characters are shown to exhibit many traditionally feminine traits such as sensitivity and caring. Despite rejecting some feminine traits in order to succeed as soldiers, they are represented as caring, nurturing, and empathetic towards each other as they share concerns, attempt to distract each other with music and songs, and comfort each other in moments of high running emotions. Even Rita, who is throughout presented as the more tough and emotionally composed of all female characters, asserts that “we can’t be mean to each other” (Pt. 3, 00:40:00). Despite needing to reject it, the prevalence of this sensitivity even during the military activities is more intensively highlighted in this version. After Zhenya kills the German soldier who tried to kill her male sergeant, she is shown to be physically repulsed by her actions and does not want to face the sergeant as she cries and tells him to “go away” (Pt. 3, 00:36:11). Despite this kind of sensitivity being rejected by Rita on the surface, the other women are represented as struggling more with the emotional repercussions of their roles and actions as soldiers.

Within this film, another aspect of femininity is particularly highlighted, namely “attractiveness” and the “desire to be the object of masculine desire” (Silva, 2008, p. 950) (Schippers, 2007, p. 95). The women are occupied with keeping their figures and seducing, or at least making an impression on, the male sergeant. They say things such as “we need additional food to keep our figures” (Pt. 1, 00:16:38) while winking at the sergeant and “the sergeant won’t be able to resist me” (Pt. 1, 00:33:00) while referring to wearing lingerie. This results in the participation in feminine activities (such as their improvised fashion show, the make-overs, interest in personal beauty, concerns about their figures) being explicitly linked to being in service of making the women sexual attractive to men. The focus on making themselves attractive for the men is embraced by many women: “I need a make-over too. I want the sergeant to warm up my bed tonight” (Pt. 1, 00:34:41). What is more, the representation of the women themselves is more sexualised. This perhaps is best represented by the scene in which the women shower under a waterfall after hiking through the swamp. This is quite sexualised and stylised

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to the extent that it feels as though the film views the women as sex objects. In this instance they are not the capable soldiers, but exist as sex objects to be viewed by the audience. This representation of women in the military is more sexualised and reinforcing femininity is partly achieved through embracing their sexuality.



*Sexualised Soldiers?*

*The Dawns Here Are Quiet* challenges the femininity of the women through their success in the masculine sphere of the military. This is very similar to the original version of the film but the representation of the women in the military in the modern version differs in its representation of reinforcing femininity. In addition to the women performing feminine traits and desiring traditional feminine gender roles, there is a focus on their sexuality and their desire to be sexually attractive to men. In this regard, the representation of women in the military is much more sexualised than in the Soviet version. This sexualisation of the women, highlighting “supremely pretty, slender-yet-busty women”, was highlighted by Valerie Sperling as indicative of contemporary Russian media in the post-Soviet era (Sperling, 2015, p. 58). Indeed, the ‘waterfall shower’ scene feels out of place and serves

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only the purpose of forming an overly sexualised representation of femininity and women in the military.

### *Ночные ласточки (Night Swallows), 2012*

*Night Swallows* presents a fictionalised account of the ‘Night Witches’ all-female bomber regiment. Unlike the new version of *The Dawns Here Are Quiet*, *Night Swallows* is significantly different from the ‘original’ version of the film. *Night Swallows* expands the scope of the story to include other Soviet military personnel as well as some limited representation of German military personnel.

As in the original film about the ‘Night Witches’, the representation of women in the military in *Night Swallows* challenges the femininity of the female protagonists. The opening scene establishes that the female characters are very skilled in their military roles. The scene shows the women being feared by the German soldiers who, upon noticing their approach, start to wildly attempt to shoot them down while trying to save themselves as they exclaim in fear “Russian plane!” even though they already know that means it is “too late” (Pt. 1, 00:07:20). Throughout the film, the women are clearly skilled pilots, as shown in the many scenes of the women flying and pulling off dangerous manoeuvres, who are highly determined and “goal-orientated” by putting their lives on the lines in order to fulfil their missions (Silva, 2008, p. 937). *Night Swallows* challenges femininity as the women are presented as eager to serve and as particularly capable in their traditionally masculine military roles as pilots.

On assignments alongside male soldiers, however, their presence is treated somewhat differently. Some of the male characters in these instances verbally imply the women might not be able to keep up “I repeat for the girls: ‘double march’” (Pt. 5, 00:26:00), or may require additional instructions about caution in dangerous situations “Beauties, follow me. Be careful. Keep your guns ready. Be careful” (Pt. 5, 00:39:05). The women, however, prove themselves skilful and fully capable to take care of themselves in these close-combat situations as they take down a German enemy threatening to shoot one of their wounded friends (Pt.6. 00:36:00) and also verbally assert this towards the men they are on

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assignment with “Don’t worry, we are not made of sugar” (Pt. 5, 00:26:00). The women are shown as capable in further military roles, even ones for which they have not been specifically trained, in addition to asserting themselves as tough and determined as they demonstrate their capabilities and do not wish to be treated differently in their military activities. None of the Russian men in this film seem to believe or say that women do not belong in the military sphere in the context of the war. This stands in stark contrast to the attitude of the German enemies in regards to women’s roles in the military. A German officer says to his Russian captive “it is inhumane to make women fight. Don’t you think?” (Pt. 1, 00:04:25) and in another instance the German soldiers discuss “why put women at risk?” (Pt. 6, 00:03:55) when they are considering to send out German women to pose as some of the Night Witches. This film highly emphasises the exceptional skills and strength of Russian women in particular, which fits in with the ‘strong-woman motif’ as these Russian women are represented in these exceptional circumstances as being able to harness their strength and skill in order to contribute to the war effort. This stands in stark contrast to the German conceptualisation of the women participating in the masculine sphere of the military.

Furthermore, the women also actively push down their feminine traits and behaviour, such as their caring and sensitive sides. There are instances in which links to “traditional feminine roles” are rejected within the military context as a well-meaning woman tells Galina “you will have children too” to which she responds “I need to go, to serve” (Pt. 7, 00:02:46) as she walks away while visibly struggling with having to make that decision (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). “Traditional feminine roles”, such as being a mother, are represented as not being achievable for her at this time due to her military commitments (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). Ultimately, the representation of the women as challenging their femininity through engagement with masculine activities and traits is much the same in *Night Swallows* as in the original film.

In *Night Swallows*, the femininity of the female protagonists is reinforced, mostly in relation to feminine social norms related to men and children. There is particular emphasis on the role of women as mothers through an encounter with an orphaned boy, in this version called Vasia. Whereas the male characters

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in this scene are not engaging and are standing awkwardly at a distance, several of the women from the regiment have sat down around the boy and are almost entranced by their maternal feelings towards him. This presents an image as if they are inherently drawn to the child as they interact with him, smile at him, and listen to his stories. Galina is then, furthermore, shown to be prepared to immediately take on the role of mother to him as she impulsively asks “do you want to live with me? I have a big house. We will win soon, and I will come for you” (Pt. 6, 00:09:06). Her words draw attention to the urgency of her motherly, protective feelings towards this orphaned child. Once she has had to bring the boy to his aunt with whom he would be living, she is shown to be extremely upset as she even says “after I gave Vasia away my heart sank. There is no need for me to live” (Pt. 7, 00:11:00). Her desires to take care of the child are so strong, her role as pilot and even her own life do not matter to her in this moment. Despite her earlier assertion of having to serve and in that rejecting her role as mother, this shows that “motherhood” provides her with a very deep sense of self that goes above anything else (Silva, 2008, p. 950).



*Galina and the Night Witches are entranced by the maternal feelings for Vasia.*

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In addition to femininity being reinforced through the traditional gender norms of motherhood, the female pilots are reinforcing their femininity through their desire to pursue romantic relationships to subsequently marry. Throughout the course of the film, Sasha and Zena, for instance, are shown to go on little dates around the camp and even get engaged. “You are my fiancé now” he tells her, as he puts an improvised ring out of intertwined twigs on her finger (Pt. 7, 00:13:35) before arranging a rendezvous with her in case “the war separates us” (Pt. 7, 00:13:45). Zena is shown to happily agree to this, while clearly dreaming of the prospect of having a life together once the war is over. This desire for a traditional domestic life reinforces the traditional feminine gender roles which Zena is reinforcing.

As in the case of Galina valuing motherhood over her military career, romantic relationships are also sometimes valued more than success in masculine military sphere. Yevgeniya, after having spent the night with the male major, says “wasn’t it foolish of me to be so eager to become a pilot” (Pt. 4, 00:14:13). Despite having been established to be a skilled pilot, in this relationship she is shown to doubt her choices and abilities and admits she would rather be “your adjutant, major. And we will drink tea every morning” (Pt. 4, 00:14:15). This goes beyond desiring a return for domestic life after the war and actually suggests that she regrets participating in the masculine military sphere. Indeed, these romantic relationships also lead to representations of the female characters in which they revert, from their strong, independent personas as military pilots, to positioning themselves as more passive and dependent. The presence and interactions with the male characters is shown to make the women revert into traditional feminine traits such as “self-deprecation, and coyness” (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 213). In *Night Swallows*, we see a much more precarious balance between the co-existence of their feminine traits and desired roles and their masculine military activities. Indeed, some of the women are willing to put their military roles on the line in favour of traditionally feminine gender roles.

*Night Swallows* is another example of a film which represents the women in the Russian military as strong and capable of participating in the masculine military sphere. That being said, this version of the Night Witches story puts more emphasis on the strong desires of the women to participate in stereotypically feminine gender roles. The women are reinforcing their femininity through their

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interpersonal relations with men in which their feminine identities as mothers and (future) wives come to the forefront.

### *Батальонъ (Battalion), 2015*

Set in the spring of 1917, *Battalion* focusses on the all-female battalion, known as the Women's Battalion of Death, that was established and sent to the front lines during the Kerensky Offensive at a time of domestic chaos in Russia. The film depicts how women from all layers of society, from the peasantry to the upper classes, volunteered to join the war effort. In this particular context, as pointed out by Lisa Kirschenbaum, the Provisional Government's decision to allow the establishment of such a regiment "had less to do with feminism ... than with the Provisional Government's willingness to resort to unconventional methods based on the belief that women's bold transgression of traditional gender boundaries constituted a powerful means of shaming men into reasserting their masculinity by re-joining the fight" (Kirschenbaum, 2007, p. 766). *Battalion*, unlike the other 2010s Russian films analysed, has no Soviet era counterpart. The history of the First World War Russian Women's battalions was under-represented in the Soviet era and the real members of the Women's Battalion of Death, easily identified by their shaven heads, were "beaten, sexually assaulted, thrown off moving trains, or killed" during the transition to Bolshevik rule due to their perceived association with the "counter-revolutionary camp" (Stockdale, 2004, p. 110).

The female protagonists of *Battalion* are represented as challenging femininity in several instances through their entry into these military roles. They are presented as both "physically and mentally tough" as they are able to endure tough military training (Silva, 2008, p. 937). Their femininity is challenged through their difficult military training, which their male commanders struggle with them putting them through (01:00:35), and the reality of the situation for which they are training. The women themselves are, however, shown to be highly determined to serve, and in asserting this, their stoicism and toughness are also reemphasised. When their female commander is arrested, the women are shown to line up with the whole battalion outside the window of the male officer in charge as a signal that they will not leave



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until she is released and they are allowed to go to the front (01:18:00). The film emphasises this by showing that they are standing there all night in the rain without moving an inch. In this manner, the film defies images of women “as weak, passive and sexual” by instead portraying them as tough and assertive (Silva, 2008, p. 954). Once again, we see the women in the military adopting masculine traits in order to succeed in the masculine military sphere.

Furthermore, the women are presented as actively rejecting femininity in order to affirm themselves as soldiers, rather than just women. This is underscored in the scene when the female recruits are about to have their heads shaved. The response from the gathered women vary from quiet resolve, to crying, to running away from the situation entirely. As hair is one of the key gender indicators, particularly with regards to femininity, the very act of having their heads shaved is understandably traumatic (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 213). As the participation in femininity is based on active participation, we can see that the choice of the women to have their heads shaved, thereby removing a key feminine gender indicator, is a strong demonstration of their choice to challenge their femininity and engage with the masculine military sphere.



*The recruits for the Women's Battalion of Death willingly surrender their hair for an opportunity to serve.*

The battalion commander, Maria Bochkareva, asserts that “my soldiers do not cry” (00:25:07) prior to the recruits having their heads shaved. This is echoed by the first woman to then step forward, as she corrects the barber who addresses her as “young lady” by saying “not lady, fighter” (00:26:19). In this manner, a sense of the need to separate the two identities is reinforced. This suggests traits associated with femininity and feminine identities, including gender indicators such as longer hair, are depicted as something that is undesired within their military roles as soldiers and asserts a need to separate them in this context. Furthermore, the mother of one of the women comes to Bochkareva to plead for her daughter to be allowed to come home as “she is a singer, not a soldier” (01:05:35). The woman herself, in response however asserts she has to serve this high calling. She reinforced the sentiment that she is now, a soldier as she turns to her commander and states “allow me to continue to serve” (01:08:00), distancing herself from her past feminine self which her mother is trying to reassert on her behalf. In this manner, the women are shown to verbally distancing themselves from the idea of being women and taking on feminine roles. The representation of women in the Women’s Battalion of Death presents one of the most striking examples of femininity being challenged. The women not only verbally distance themselves from their femininity by declaring themselves soldiers before women, but they also physically distance themselves from their femininity by shaving their heads and removing a key feminine gender indicator.

That being said, the reinforcement of femininity is also on display in *Battalion*. Despite Bochkareva’s assertion that “my soldiers do not cry” (00:25:07), the women’s hair being shaved is represented as deeply traumatic for them. As the camera passes the women’s faces as they have lined up, it shows many of them with tears in their eyes and trembling lips (00:25:07). The idea of losing one of their main “gender indicators” is represented as a major internal conflict for the women (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 213). As mentioned above, some women do run out of the room clearly unwilling to surrender this gender indicator but the imagery of the women shedding a tear while stoically awaiting their turn in the barber’s chair speaks volumes. Despite Bochkareva’s assertions, these soldiers do cry and do grieve for their lost hair and perhaps a lost part of their feminine identity. This reinforces their femininity by

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demonstrating that hair is important to their femininity, but speaks to the importance to the women of serving in the military as they would give up many important things for the opportunity.

What is more, the military training is also shown to be difficult for the women because it entails them going against many of their feminine traits. This is particularly telling in a scene in which their female commander tries to encourage the women to develop masculine military traits such as aggression. This is highlighted as a trait which is required in militaries in order to develop “aggressive soldiers with skills of violence” (Silva, 2008, p. 937). The women find this incredibly challenging to the extent that it goes against their very selves: one of the women responds “I can’t” (00:57:00) even after the other woman, with visible repulse, hits her. Eventually they are pushed into each other by the female commander in order to force out some aggression towards each other, but it very much represented then as something that goes against their very being. This reinforces their femininity by demonstrating that it is a deeply held set of values and traits which cannot easily be tossed aside.

Despite the explicit assertions of their identities as soldiers over their identities as women, feminine traits such as “sensitivity” do still come forward in their representations (Silva, 2008, p. 950). At the front after their first close combat encounter during which they stabbed and watched an enemy die slowly, emotions are shown to run very high (02:08:32). This is not condemned by their female commander and is represented as accepted and normal. The feminine trait of sensitivity is not rejected or dismissed in favour of (re)asserting more masculine and military related traits, instead, she is embraced and comforted and she is allowed to be upset about this. Despite the stark rejection and distancing of femininity at times, at heart they are still represented as sensitive, caring women who allow for feminine traits and comfort each other in moments of high emotions.

In *Battalion*, the women are represented as both challenging and reinforcing their femininity. While on the one hand, the women actively reject their femininity by declaring themselves soldiers first and surrendering their hair. We also see, on the other hand, the women engaging with feminine traits such as sensitivity and struggling to adapt to the masculine traits required by the military. *Battalion* deals

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with the representation of these women in an interesting way as their challenging of femininity, in shaving their heads, also reinforces their femininity by demonstrating the sacrifice involved. This deepens our understanding of how important and deeply held their convictions are to serve by engaging in the masculine military sphere.

### Preliminary Conclusions

The representation of femininity and women in the military in Russian cinema is similar to the Soviet representation as women are shown to be more than capable at taking on and succeeding in the masculine military sphere. For the most part, they are represented as being able to perform as “both women and soldiers” (Silva, 2008, p. 941). Unlike the representation from the Soviet era, the balance between challenging and reinforcing femininity is different. Furthermore, the femininity which is being reinforced has shifted in response to the changing social and cultural environment of post-Soviet Russia.

In many ways, the femininity of women in the military in Russian cinema is challenged in much the same way as in the Soviet cinema. The women in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet Here* and *Night Swallows* are shown to be successful and able in the military tasks. They regularly impress and outshine male colleagues and are shown to be exemplary soldiers. The women across all three films verbally challenge their femininity. The women in *Night Swallows* assert that they do not have to be treated differently than the male soldiers, the women in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* reinforce to their male commanders that they are indeed ‘seasoned soldiers’ despite what he assumes based on their gender but it is *Battalion* which has the most striking example of the women declaring themselves to be soldiers first. Indeed, *Battalion* provides some of the most interesting examples of challenging femininity as the women of the Women’s Battalion of Death actively choose to challenge their femininity and engage in an internal struggle to accomplish this. We see the women overcoming their fears and emotions to surrender their hair which is, as noted above, one of the most important feminine gender indicators thereby disrupting their “stable gender identities throughout their lives” (Silva, 2008, p. 941). This demonstrates that challenging femininity is a choice and a particularly difficult one for these women. This recalls the

‘strong-woman’ motif as the women make the difficult choice to step up and engage in difficult, life threatening tasks due to exceptional circumstances (Marsh, 2011, p. 13).

The reinforcing of femininity is the aspect of the representation of women in the military in Russian cinema in which we see a difference. While we still see a focus on traditional feminine gender norms and roles, such as the desire to be wives and mothers, we also see an increased focus on sexuality and the representation of women in a more overtly sexual way. This is most obvious in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* in which the women are now more sexual and the film focusses on their physical forms to a much greater extent. The women are represented to an extent as sex objects for the male gaze of the audience. Their femininity is reinforced in the instance of the ‘waterfall shower’ scene through their sexualised naked bodies. This can be attributed to the “remasculinisation of Russia” in which we see “more clear-cut gender roles” (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 23) (Atwood, 1995, p. 519). Although this representation does not necessarily undermine their representation as strong and successful in the military sphere, it does represent the women in a more sexualised light seemingly for the benefit and enjoyment of the contemporary ‘remasculinised’ Russian audience. Indeed, the stronger focus on the women as sex objects in conjunction with the greater focus on their desire to be wives and mothers may serve as “a tool for remasculinisation” (Atwood, 1995, p. 514).

Now that I have analysed the six films from across the two time periods, in the next chapter I will compare the representations from the Soviet and Russian films in order to answer the question of ‘How has the representation of femininity in relation to women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema changed?’

**Chapter 6: Comparing the Representations of Femininity and Women in the Military in Russian and Soviet Cinema**

This chapter will compare the similarities and differences between the representations of femininity and women in the military in Soviet and contemporary Russian cinema. I will revisit and compare findings and conclusions in relation to the representation of women in these films in which their femininity is challenged or reinforced, based upon my theoretical approach derived from the work of Jennifer Mathers. This comparison will allow me to determine how the representation of femininity and women in the Russian military has changed between the two time periods and thus answer my research question: ‘How has the representation of femininity in relation to women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema changed?’

**Challenging the Representations of Femininity in Russian and Soviet Cinema**

Prior to delving into my analysis, it is important to recall that the conceptualisation of femininity as “contextually and culturally specific sets of meanings for what women ... are and should be” (Schippers, 2007, p. 92). Furthermore, the traditionally feminine traits (such as caring, nurturing, sensitivity, attractiveness) and “traditional feminine [gender] roles”, such as being wives and mothers, are generally perceived as not fitting in with the masculine sphere that the military represents (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). Silva argues that the traditional conceptualisations of femininity and masculinity link “masculinity and soldiering in a fundamental and inextricable way that is always in juxtaposition to femininity” (Silva, 2008, p. 941). This makes the presence of women in this masculine sphere of the military a complex concept to represent in films, as it has the potential to either highlight “the military woman’s feminine identity, thus undermining her successful involvement in the military” or “the military woman’s masculine identity, thus undermining her femininity and consequently her status and claim on womanhood” (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 224).

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The challenging of femininity, and therefore the potential focus on the women's 'military masculine identities', is broadly speaking similar across the representations of both time periods. Recalling that "soldiering" is generally constructed "as a predominantly male and masculine activity", representations of women succeeding within this sphere can challenge femininity (Silva, 2008, p. 940). Across both sets of films, there is a great deal of focus on the women in their military roles with attention paid to their skills, capabilities, and the sacrifices that they give in these roles. The engagement with masculine practices and the skill and success in the military sphere is visible across all of the films. The two cinematic versions of the 'Night Witches' prominently display the skill of the women in their roles as pilots. Furthermore, *Snipers* demonstrates the skill and hard work of Aliya as she becomes a highly accomplished sniper on the Baltic Front. All of the films demonstrate that the women engage with masculine traits, such as stoicism being "physically and mentally tough", and "goal-oriented", is central to their success within the military sphere (Silva, 2008, p. 937).

The adoption of masculine traits goes hand in hand with the sacrifice of certain feminine traits and gender norms in order to gain success in the military. This is most striking in *Battalion* in which the female recruits willingly sacrifice their hair, a key feminine gender indicator, in order to serve in the Russian army. Sacrifices are a common motif across both time periods with female protagonists such as Aliya in *Snipers* sacrificing a traditionally feminine domestic life in order to succeed in the military. These sacrifices of femininity for success in the military recalls Furia and Bielby's general assertion that female soldiers, in order to be successful as soldiers, may fail "at some or all aspects of heteronormative femininity" (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 214). Indeed, success in the military for women is shown to require the suppression of traditionally feminine traits and actions, from the assertion that "soldiers do not cry" (00:25:07) in *Battalion* to Aliya's tough and determined attitude hiding a profound sadness at her failure to have a traditional domestic life as a wife and mother. The representations of women in the military in both Russian and Soviet cinema therefore share the depiction of femininity being challenged through active participation in masculine activities and the adoption of masculine traits (often at the expense of feminine traits).

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The challenging of established institutional conceptualisations of femininity is also a common theme across both time periods. The representations of women in the military in both Soviet and Russia cinema show them challenging the limitations set by the masculine military which are based on negative assumptions about women and femininity. Across both periods, the women have to prove their capability and skills in their military roles either through actions or words. In both versions of *The Dawns Here Are Quiet*, the women need to verbally assert that they are competent in the military roles, which is demonstrated in the 2015 version when the female commander confirms that “we are all seasoned soldiers” (Pt. 1, 00:12:30). Such sentiments are echoed in *Night Swallows* (2012), “we are not made of sugar” (Pt. 5, 00:26:00), and in *Battalion* when their feminine identities are downplayed, “not lady, fighter” (00:26:19).

The challenging of the military institutional limitations towards women is most obvious in *Snipers*. Aliya is first presented with the choice of working “a job somewhere at the headquarters or medical battalion” (00:06:55). Aliya has to overcome the institutionalised sexism and negative preconceptions of her as a woman in relation to her femininity. The military as an institution is initially represented as seeing women and femininity as associated with more negative feminine traits, reminiscent of the “fragile” nature mentioned by Mathers (Mathers, 2006, p. 221). This is demonstrated through the male soldier telling Aliya and her fellow female soldiers that “you need us to save you” (00:11:18), where ‘us’ is the masculine male soldiers. Aliya challenges the conceptualisation of femininity and becomes highly successful as a sniper on the Baltic Front. Aliya therefore ends the concept of “provisional acceptance”, where women in military roles have to prove themselves in every new situation, as she is shown to set an example which allows more women to participate in particularly masculine roles, such as snipers, within the masculine military sphere after her success (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 221). The representation of women in the military across both time periods therefore shows women as capable of participating in masculine military tasks and roles, but also capable of challenging conceptualisations of femininity in order to participate in combat roles within the military.



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The representation of women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema with regards to challenging femininity is therefore quite consistent. The women are shown to be capable, skilful, and successful in a range of military combat roles across both time periods. The women are able to adopt and adapt to masculine traits and roles thereby challenging traditional conceptualisations of femininity. Furthermore, the women actively participate in challenging their femininity. The women joining the Women's Battalion of Death struggle with the reality of their decision, illustrated through their need to surrender their symbolically important hair, yet choosing to engage with masculinity in order to participate in masculine combat roles and serve their country. Indeed, the women represented across the two time periods are dedicated, "physically and mentally tough, goal-oriented" women who challenge their femininity in order to participate and succeed in the masculine military sphere (Silva, 2008, p. 937).

### Reinforcing the Representations of Femininity in Russian and Soviet Cinema

Reinforcing aspects of femininity, such as gender indicators and feminine gender roles, is understood to be intertwined with the representation of women in the military as they are something which "provided them with stable gender identities throughout their lives" (Silva, 2008, p. 941). Indeed, according to Furia and Bielby, these aspects of their femininity have the potential to be overlooked in representations of women in the military in film, particularly when their "masculine military identities" undermine "her femininity and consequently her status and claim on womanhood" (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 224).

Across both the Russian and Soviet periods, the femininity of the women in the military is reinforced through their desire to participate in traditionally feminine identities and gender roles, in particular as being "wives, mothers" (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). This dynamic is almost standard in all of the films as the women are shown to desire domestic lives as wives and mothers. This is most obviously demonstrated in the flashback scenes of *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* (1972) in which Rita dreamily fantasises about a return to her pre-war life as wife and mother. This representation of femininity is further underlined in *Night Witches in the Sky* (1981) and *Night Swallows* (2012) through the female

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character's relationships with the orphaned boy. Although the specifics of the character names are altered between the two versions of the 'Night Witches' story, this dynamic remains and therefore demonstrates the perceived importance of the mother role to women and femininity across both time periods. In both films, the women are shown to happily participate in the motherly role towards the young boy and enjoy reinforcing their femininity through this feminine gender role. However, we do see a key difference here as the contemporary Russian version places an even greater importance of this mother role for the character of Galina. When she returns the boy to his aunt, she sadly says "after I gave Vasia away my heart sank. There is no need for me to live" (Pt. 7, 00:11:00). This demonstrates that the role of mother was more important to her than her participation in the military as a pilot or even her own life. This emphasises the perceived importance of motherhood to her femininity and her very being. Indeed, the increased importance of traditionally feminine gender roles over the participation in masculine military roles in contemporary Russian cinema is a key difference between the time periods.

This key difference is further demonstrated through the increased importance of the feminine gender role of being a wife in the contemporary Russian films. In the Soviet films, this is undeniably presented as a gender role which is important to the women and is used to reinforce femininity. Even Aliya, who is represented as the most stoic and successful woman in the military, breaks down emotionally due to her perceived failure at being a wife through her perceived failure to be a mother. In the contemporary Russian films, however, the feminine gender role of wife is presented on similar terms to that of motherhood. In *Night Swallows* (2012), Yevgeniya while in bed with her boyfriend says "wasn't it foolish of me to be so eager to become a pilot" (Pt. 4, 00:14:13), thereby suggesting that she prefers this wife role to her masculine military role as a pilot. Indeed, there is a lot of continuity across both periods but there is a definite shift of the relative importance of traditionally feminine gender roles, particularly those of being a wife and mother, in the contemporary Russian films. This reflects the academic understanding of gender politics and roles in contemporary Russia where we see "more clear-cut gender roles" (Atwood, 1995, p. 519).

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What is more, the contemporary Russian films also have an increased focus on the sexuality of the women thereby reinforcing their femininity through their sexual identities. These traits and behaviours reinforce feminine traits such as “attractiveness” and the “desire to be the object of masculine desire” (Silva, 2008, p. 950) (Schipper, 2007, p. 95). Although somewhat present in the Soviet films, the desire to be desirable to men is much more present in the contemporary Russian films. While this is shown in *Night Swallows* (2012) through the relationships of the women with men in the military at their camp, this is most striking in the 2015 version of *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* which represents the women in a much more sexualised manner than the original 1972 version. The women in the 2015 version are much more focussed on their physical appearance and how this would make them more attractive to the male sergeant, “I need a make-over too. I want the sergeant to warm up my bed tonight” (Pt. 1, 00:34:41). This increased focus on the sexualisation of the women is best represented through the ‘waterfall shower’ scene, which was not present in the original 1972 version, and appears to exist almost purely for the male gaze of the audience. In this instance, the femininity of the women is reinforced through their representation as sexual beings to the extent that they could even be described as sex objects. This scene also recalls Valerie Sperling noting that contemporary Russian media does indeed sexualise women by highlighting “supremely pretty, slender-yet-busty women” (Sperling, 2015, p. 58). This can also be understood in terms of the “remasculinisation of Russia” as the women, although recognised for their masculine military capabilities in the film, are simultaneously represented in a more sexualised manner that we might expect from the “more clear-cut gender roles” of contemporary Russia (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 23) (Atwood, 1995, p. 519).

The representation of women in the military in Russian and Soviet films, with regard to reinforcing femininity, has therefore shifted to reflect the “more clear-cut gender roles” of contemporary Russia (Atwood, 1995, p. 519). Although the women are still capable in the masculine military sphere, the contemporary Russian films put a greater emphasis on reinforcing femininity in terms of traditionally feminine gender roles, such as being a wife and mother, and feminine traits, particularly related to attractiveness and sexuality.

### Preliminary Conclusions

There are clear continuities visible in the representations of femininity and women in the military across the two analysed time periods of Russian and Soviet cinema. Both the Soviet representation and the contemporary Russian representation show women both challenging and reinforcing their femininity through highlighting both their feminine and masculine identities. This section will provide a final synthesis of the main changes in the representation of femininity and women in the military in Soviet and contemporary Russian war films before definitively answering the research question in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

Both the Russian and Soviet films represent the women serving in the military as occupying a “precarious position”, manoeuvring their feminine identities within a masculine sphere (Furia & Bielby, 2009, p. 220). This is represented as a struggle for the women to manage their identities as “women and as soldiers” (Silva, 2008, p. 941). This thesis has focussed on the representation of women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema as it concerns their relationship to femininity. Across all six films in both the 1970s and 1980s in Soviet cinema and the 2010s in contemporary Russian cinema, femininity plays a key role in the representation of women in the Russian military. Femininity is both challenged and reinforced in both time periods, the major change between the Soviet era and contemporary Russian era is the balance between these two relationships to femininity.

The challenging of femininity has remained relatively similar across the time periods. The women in the military are shown to adopt masculine traits, such as stoicism, and try to limit their participation in feminine traits, such as sensitivity and caring. This is an important part of the women’s success within the masculine military sphere: success for women in the military is achieved through them adhering to masculine traits and norms. This recalls Jennifer Mathers’ argument that militaries “rely on and perpetuate beliefs about gender, and they depend on men and women to accept, internalise, and act on those beliefs” (Mathers, 2013, p. 124). This active choice to participate in the masculine military sphere and to challenge aspects of femininity is best demonstrated in *Battalion* as the women surrender their

hair, thereby removing a key feminine gender indicator. The women across all films are shown to be stepping up to protect their country in a time of crisis. This recalls the “strong-woman motif”, a long-standing representation of femininity throughout Russian literature, who takes on a “heroine” role in times of crisis before returning to the domestic sphere in times of calm (Dunham, 1960, pp. 460, 462). Ultimately, in relation to femininity being challenged, the representation of women in the military has not shifted to any great extent between the Soviet and contemporary Russian eras.

However, in contrast the representation of women in the military in relation to femininity being reinforced has shifted in Russia over time. As noted previously, traditional feminine gender roles and traits were reinforced throughout all analysed films. The women in all of the films demonstrate, to some extent, a desire to participate in traditionally feminine gender roles, particularly being wives and mothers. This is true for the Soviet but it is more prominent and stressed in the contemporary Russian films. In the contemporary Russian films, unlike in the Soviet films, being a wife and mother is shown to be more important than participating in masculine military combat roles. In *Night Swallows* (2012), the female pilots actively wish that they could choose a different life as either a mother to an orphan or wife to a male soldier. This restructuring of gender roles is reminiscent of the social and cultural reality of contemporary Russia wherein the “remasculinisation of Russia” has resulted in “more clear-cut gender roles” within the contemporary Russian films (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 23) (Atwood, 1995, p. 519). This is not to say that these gender roles were not presented as important in the Soviet era film, even stoic Aliya broke down emotionally at her regrets towards not being a wife and mother, but they are presented as much more important to the women and femininity in the contemporary Russian films. These shifting gender norms are further represented in the contemporary Russian films by the increased sexualisation of the women. The ‘waterfall shower’ scene in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* (2015) overemphasises the nude forms of the women to the extent that they become sex objects for the male gaze of the audience. This furthermore links into the “remasculinisation of Russia” by showing a representation of women in the military characterised by their sexuality and attractiveness as “supremely pretty, slender-yet-busty women” (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 23) (Sperling, 2015, p. 58). Ultimately, femininity is reinforced across both eras but traditionally feminine traits, such as

attractiveness, and feminine gender roles, such as being wives and mothers, are reinforced to a much greater extent in the contemporary Russian films.

In conclusion, the representation of women in the military has most changed in regards to the emphasis on their feminine identities. In the contemporary Russian films, the representation of women in the military has shifted to further emphasise and reinforce their femininity in regards to traditionally feminine traits and gender norms. This is roughly in line with the “remasculinisation of Russia” and the desire for “more clear-cut gender roles” within contemporary Russian media (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 23) (Atwood, 1995, p. 519). The representation of the women in the military challenging femininity through their participation and success in masculine military combat roles has remained largely the same, but contemporary Russian representations of women in the military emphasise feminine traits, such as attractiveness, and traditional gender roles to a much greater extent.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

At the beginning of this thesis, I stated that my research would be based around the research question, ‘How has the representation of femininity in relation to women in the military in Russian and Soviet cinema changed?’ In the previous chapter, I brought all of my analysis together in order to formulate an answer to this question. I have based my analysis on Jennifer Mathers’ framework of “whether traditional notions of femininity are being reinforced or challenged” (Mathers, 2006, p. 221). As argued in the previous chapter, the representation of femininity in relation to women in the military has changed between the two time periods analysed. This change is primarily related to the way in which femininity is reinforced in contemporary Russian cinema. While femininity is reinforced in the Soviet films, femininity is reinforced to a much greater extent in the contemporary Russian films and it is even suggested that traditionally feminine gender roles are more important to these women in the military than their military combat roles. The Russian cinematic representations of women in the military now place more emphasis on traditionally feminine gender roles, such as being wives and mothers, and on traditionally feminine traits, such as attractiveness.

My conclusion is in line with academic literature on femininity and the military in contemporary Russia. Helena Goscilo echoes my conclusion when considering the position of women in the military in contemporary Russia. Goscilo argues that “despite the Soviet Union’s pragmatic reliance on female combatants in the Second World War, the Russian military remains a male domain in a society indentured to a rhetoric that essentialises femininity ... Women’s “duties” primarily consist of cultivating physical allure and bearing children” (Goscilo, 2012, p. 15). I believe that my thesis has filled a gap in the academic literature on the representations of femininity and women in the military in Russia in Russian and Soviet cinema. My thesis has also further demonstrated that these films are not merely representative of the time periods which are shown, but reflect the society and culture from which these films stem. Indeed, this recalls David Gillespie’s argument that “the historical film is rarely, if ever a true representation of the past” as it tries to be “in tune with the modern consciousness” (Gillespie, 2003, p. 58). The contemporary Russian films formulate a representation of femininity and

these historic women in contemporary terms: they are at once the heroic figures defending the Motherland from the Nazis, while also reflecting contemporary Russian attitudes towards women and femininity.

Although my thesis has filled a gap in the academic literature on the representations of femininity and women in the Russian military, I believe there are still other topics which deserve further research and analysis. One such topic could include the intersection of these representations of femininity and national identity. In Russia, as explained by Rosalind Marsh, women have played an important role “as cultural symbols of the nation” (Marsh, 2013, p. 196). As most of the films deal with women in the Second World War, and considering the importance of this war for Russian national identity, this would be an interesting lens through which to examine these representations. I believe that *Snipers* could provide a particularly unique case study. The character of Aliya, a Soviet female ethnic Kazakh sniper, would allow for multi-faceted analysis considering the issues of gender, race, and national identity. In *Snipers*, Aliya compares herself to Joan of Arc (01:16:37) and is, similarly, represented as fighting for a higher calling while her femininity is pushed somewhat into the background. To an extent, Aliya is presented as more of a symbol or a martyr than a fully rounded female character. Her position as a national hero in Kazakhstan could therefore be understood as compared to Joan of Arc in France, a woman whose femininity is understated in favour of her position as a national symbol. I believe that this the representation of Aliya in *Snipers* could be the basis for a fascinating analysis of femininity, national identity, and race across the post-Soviet cultural landscape of Russia and Kazakhstan.



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