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An Assessment

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Abstract

Change is the law of nature, and so is warfare. Thus, the character of warfare remains fluid as it rapidly changes with time due to the involvement of non-state actors like Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs), states' use of disruptive technologies and non-kinetic elements such as information, misinformation, disinformation, sanctions and influence as their tools. Besides, the 'feminisation of war' as coined by Mary Kaldor has become a unique characteristic of modern warfare due to women's participation in performing myriad tasks, including direct frontline roles. The paper aims to assess the involvement of Ukrainian women, both as combatant and non-combatant, in the long-running Russia-Ukraine war since February 2022.

Keywords: Warfare, Russian-Ukraine War, Combatants, Women Soldiers

By joining the Armed Forces, Ukrainian women have demonstrated to the world that they are capable of defending the state on an equal footing with men.

—Victoria Arnautova

Gender Advisor to Ukraine's Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief

Introduction

Change is the law of nature, and so is warfare. Thus, the character of warfare remains fluid as it rapidly changes with time. Going beyond Hedley Bull's understanding of war as an organised violence, Clausewitz's political intercourse with a combination of other means, Mary Kaldor's New Wars, that emerged in the mid-1980s; the character of war is undergoing transformation due to the increasing involvement of non-state actors like Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs), states' use of disruptive technologies and non-kinetic elements such as information, misinformation, disinformation, sanctions and influence as their tools. Nevertheless, strong and well-trained soldiers remain pertinent in war in addition to these newest tools. Besides, feminisation of war (Kaldor, Mary, 1999) is another unique characteristic of modern warfare due to women's gradual participation in performing myriad tasks, including direct frontline roles. Though number of female soldiers in the history of war is insignificant, their little roles have had a tremendous impact.

Recollecting various stories of women warriors executing numerous responsibilities—ranging from medical and administrative staff to intelligence, munitions, espionage, and, most notably, supporting their family when their male folks went to war. A case in point is Yeomen Female (F) during WWI; Hello Girls on the Allied Side, and Women's Battalion of Death by the Russians in 1917. Indian women like Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, who fought against British, Manipuri women fighting in the First and Second 'Nupi Lan' in 1904 and 1939 respectively against British, involvement of Algerian women fighting for their independence from France (Hall, Sarah, 2019), and female soldiers who joined Kurdish group to fight against ISIS in 2015 (UN WOMEN, 2016) also justifies the important role of women in wartime. In this vein, it is noteworthy to assess the involvement of Ukrainian women, both combatant and non-combatants, in the long-running Russia-Ukraine war since February 2022 to defend their country against Russia.

Appearance of Ukrainian Women in the War

Like women in any other society, Ukrainian women have had little role to play in the army or the war at large. They came from an orthodox and conservative society where women preferred and were expected to be housewives taking care of the house. Nevertheless, their roles in various resistance movements from the pre-independence era cannot be discounted. For instance, in 1929, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) organised a mass movement to free Ukraine from Russia and Poland, where women and girls participated in supporting an independent Ukraine (Kis, Oksana, 2015). Later, the OUN formed a non-military women's network, becoming a medical service corps for the OUN's fighting force, known as Ukrayinska Povstans'ka Armiya (Ukrainian Insurgent Army). In other instances, Ukrainian women were hugely involved in the Zbroini Syly Ukrayiny (hereafter Ukrainian Armed Forces) in 1993 (Kis, Oksana, 2015) after independence from Russia.

Women also participated in overthrowing the former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, a pro-Russian President, in 2014. However, Ukrainian women's first presence in the public space could be traced back to the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014 or the Euromaidan protest (Philips, Sarah, D., and Martsenyuk, Tamara, 2023). Women supported protestors in makeshift hospitals and joined self-defence units (Ewe, Koh, 2022). After this Maidan protest, women's participation gradually multiplied in all spheres from 2014 to 2022.

As they became more noticeable, their political participation increased from 3 per cent in 1990 to 20 per cent in 2021 (Odarchenko, Kateryna, 2021). Beyond the political sphere,

Ukrainian women have taken persistent roles in fighting as combatants since Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022.

Ukrainian Women and Conflict

The unending Russia-Ukraine war exemplifies a new prototype of modern warfare because of the involvement of a large number of PMSCs, new technologies and participation of Ukrainian women in equal footing with their male counterparts against Russia. They have become the spine in supporting ‘large scale logistics efforts, and making camouflage netting for troops’ (Specia, Megan and Emile Ducke, 2022). As highlighted in Amnesty International’s report, Ukrainian women play multiple roles— ranging from the frontline of conflict such as ‘soldiers and fighters’ to ‘doctors and nurses’, volunteers, peace activists, and carers for their communities, families and the internally displaced people or refugees (Amnesty International, 2023). More than 60,000 Ukrainian women joined the military—5000 joined as combatants, paramedics and snipers against Russia (US Embassy & Consulates in Italy, 2023). According to an open source, more than 107 women were either killed or injured while fighting against Russia. By the end of 2022, 350 Ukrainian women in the military received state decorations in addition to two women who were awarded the highest title of Heroes of Ukraine (posthumously) (Visit Ukraine, 2023).

Ukrainian women’s participation as combatants challenges the civilian-combatant division as highlighted in the Geneva Convention. Initially, Ukraine’s laws had restricted and forbidden women from joining as professional soldiers. Similarly, when Russia waged war against Crimea in 2014, Ukrainian women were prohibited from taking up combat positions (Ewe, Koh, 2022). However, the military soon had to break the earlier reservation and amend its laws. They passed a military gender equality law in 2018, thereby allowing women to train and serve during their respective contracts. Iryna Sergeyeva, the first Ukrainian woman, underwent two years of training and later joined the Territorial Defense Force as a reservist. Initially, five per cent of women were employed as combat soldiers and military intelligence officers before February 2022, later the number multiplied gradually. With the looming Russian threat, Ukraine’s Territorial Defense Force consisting mainly of light infantry, is the country’s reserve armed forces branch. They perform auxiliary missions behind the regular military and called for volunteers in early 2022 to defend their homeland. Several volunteers

called 'weekend warriors'¹ (Ponomarenko, Illia, 2022), including women, were asked to join Ukraine's Territorial Defense Force.

At the start of the war in February 2022, unlike Ukrainian women, men aged between 18 and 40 were prohibited from leaving the country due to Martial Law issued by the Ukraine State Border Guard Service. It was made mandatory for men to stay back and fight against Russia (Carpenter, Charlie, 2022). Thus, Ukrainian women took this opportunity to raise their voices globally, and represent themselves as vanguard soldiers and unofficial ambassadors of their country on global platforms (Ross, Adrienne, 2023).

In a virtual panel session, Ukraine's ambassador to the United States, Oksana Markarova, stated, "Women are...heroes of this war" (Specia, Megan and Emile Duche 2022). Markarova stated that women led the communities when their men left the house for war and risked their lives to 'keep hospitals, schools and even villages operational' with no supplies of water and electricity. Besides, they dispatched food to affected people and soldiers as well. At the international forum, they acted as 'decision-makers to end the conflict, conflict prevention, mitigation and other processes' to instil peace and security in Ukraine (UN WOMEN, 2023). Millions of Ukrainian women ranging from businesswomen to dressmakers to school teachers mobilised across the country to provide logistics and non-combat support by portraying themselves as the 'rear front line' (Ferris, A., Rotma/Lviv, 2022).

Push Factors

Prior to the Russia-Ukraine war, Ukrainian women volunteered to become combatants in the Donbas conflict in 2014 wherein they became part of an ad hoc militia called 'volunteer battalions'(Giri, Kesab, 2022). For their contribution, 257 women were honoured with state awards. These women served in the 'Invisible Battalion' (Giri, Kesab, 2022) and 62 combatant women were registered publicly by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2017 (ibid). By 2020, 15.6 per cent of the Ukrainian Armed Forces were constituted by women (Giri, Kesab, 2022). In early 2021, 57,000 women were there in Ukraine's armed forces, comprising 22.8 per cent of the total (Ewe, Koh, 2022). After the war broke out, the number further grew to 25 per cent. Many women changed their profession from media-related professionals to army lieutenants; those who aspired to be artists and psychologists, joined as combatants, as they saw the war as an existential fight and a hurdle for their aspirations. (The Times of India, 2022).

¹ People carry out their usual civilian tasks but also contributes to occasional drills and exercises in their free time.

This was possible because of the adoption of a different set of policies establishing norms for women's inclusion in the military by the Ukrainian government: i) the February 2015 military mobilisation of women wherein women aged 20 to 50 were mobilised to serve in medical, communications and logistics; ii) the December 2021 requirement that professional women register for conscription; and iii) the February 2022 declaration of Martial Law. According to the policy adopted in 2015, 14,000 women served in the armed forces: 1582 as women officers, 12,388 as private sergeants and non-commissioned officers, and 349 as cadets (Darden, J. Trisko, 2023). According to the 2021 mobilisation policy, some Ukrainian women were registered and women between the ages of 18 and 60 were employed in the armed military; however, conscription was not mandatory, and neither was the inclusion of women's participation in combat. However, they were facilitated to serve in territorial defence units rather than on the front lines. Unlike policies declared in February 2015 and December 2021, the February 2022 declaration makes conscription mandatory for women. Thus, these policies provided Ukrainian women avenues to get involved in the ongoing war without any reservation, though certain challenges persist.

Challenges Faced by Ukrainian Women

Traditionally, the Ukrainian Society is deeply patriarchal in nature and women are not allowed to be involved especially in the defence sector. However, in recent times, there has been an increasing acceptance of women's participation especially in the ongoing war. One of the challenges faced by most Ukrainian servicewomen is their recognition vis-a-vis their male counterparts. The Ukrainian Armed Forces follows a hierarchical ladder comprising horizontal and vertical gender segregation. Women in the former had some reservations about the occupational categories being offered to them in the military. The latter reflects leaders not letting women serve in senior ranks, especially by limiting women from participating in active combat positions outside women-specific tasks (Darden, J. Trisko, 2023). It could be because of the conventional belief that 'men are ideal combatants and women are substitutes for absent men' (Darden, J. Trisko, 2023). This substitution approach reinforces the gender gap rather than empowering women folks.

However, the new legislation adopted in 2018 (Darden, J. Trisko, 2023) recognised women's equal status as that of men in the armed forces and they were permitted to serve in various combat specialities such as 'armoured vehicle gunners, snipers and infantry'. Before this, the law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men (2005) and Principles on the Prevention and Combating of Discrimination in Ukraine (2012) were adopted,

but equal treatment for males and females remains a question mark in Ukrainian law (Darden, J. Trisko, 2023).

Undoubtedly, lack of male soldiers has compelled Ukraine to allow women to participate as combatants since 2016. The country also adopted its first National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security, making it public according to UNSC Resolution 1325 in 2022, and thus opened all military roles for women (Mathers, Jennifer G., 2023).

Attitude towards women's participation in the war have changed gradually. For instance, Ukraine renamed its National Defender's Day as the 'Day of Men and Women Defenders of Ukraine' in 2021. By October 2022, roughly 8000 women officers were inducted and even one of Ukraine's Defence Ministers is a woman (The Brussels Times, 2022). Nevertheless, female soldiers have to overcome difficulties regarding promotion, getting uniforms, their appropriate size boots and body armour (Mathers, Jennifer G., and Anna Kvit, 2023).

Coupled with these challenges are the question of sexual and gender-based violence and dangerous health conditions, which have a detrimental effect on their mental and physical health (Specia, Megan and Emile Duche, 2022). Due to lack of healthcare facilities, psychological support, and the inability to provide health check-ups for pregnant women, women and children suffer the most in this war. Women and children are being exposed to 'war crimes, gender-based violence, arbitrary killings, rape and trafficking' (Khullar, 2022). Women face many challenges on both fronts, whether as combatants or non-combatants.

Russian Women and War

Russian female volunteers, such as the all-women 'Death Battalion' led by Maria Bochkareva during the Russian Revolution and the 588th Night Bomber regiment during WWII (CSIS, 2020), were known for their contribution, unlike Russian women in modern warfare. Interestingly, many countries adopted policies to include and increase the number of women's participation in their nation's armed forces. However, Russia required soldiers but excluded women from including in the military. Conscription applies to Russian males between 18 and 27 years old.

Women joining the Russian Armed Forces must pass a modified physical exam and pregnancy test. Russian female soldiers are restricted from frontline combat roles such as serving on aircraft, submarines or tanks. The government prohibited service women from mining, firefighting, construction, metalwork, and jobs associated with heavy lifting, welding, diving, etc. In the Russian Armed Forces, there were approximately 35,000 Russian women

joined as voluntary contract-based personnel in 2015 (Daraden, J. Trisko, 2023). By March 2023, their number multiplied to 39,000, out of which 5000 were officers (Daraden, J. Trisko, 2023), though their roles are not clear. The Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu specified that a total of 1,100 servicewomen were involved in Ukraine (Daraden, J. Trisko, 2023). Nevertheless, a study carried out by Meduza and Mediazon confirmed lesser involvement of women in the ongoing war— out of 27,000 Russian combatants' deaths, only four were women (Meduza and Mediazona, 2023).

For Russia, a strong state needs its men to fight, thus visualising no role for women in the military, especially during war. Hence, high gender inequality persists in Russia. Most notable Russian institutions are male-dominated, except for two women who hold positions today (Daraden, J. Trisko, 2023). According to some authors, 'For the Kremlin, the war has to do only with men except for a few women in uniform, who serve medical duties' (Daraden, J. Trisko, 2023). Vladimir Putin does not want to disturb the tradition of 'masculinized character of the state' and Russia's Armed Forces by recruiting more women (Mathers, Jennifer G., 2023). Putin's other concern is about the dignity of his 'special military operation' whereby mobilising women into combat in the war will pose a stern question (Mathers, Jennifer G., 2023). This is why Russian women soldiers are not visible in the ongoing war, unlike Ukrainian female soldiers.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war echoes a new transformation, breaking the gender inequality and persistent cultural barriers embedded in Ukrainian society for years. The war modified the cultural process and transformed the men-dominated institutions, especially the military profession, by including women. One of the key takeaways that needs to be highlighted from the ongoing fighting is the plight and suffering of the people of Ukraine. Yet, there is a silver lining, too— Ukrainian women have become an omnipresent force in Ukraine's war. They feel empowered since they can find a platform to confront the long-held stereotypes about their role in post-Soviet society. Another issue is the word 'substitution' ascribed to women's participation in the war. Ukrainian women have been able to fight the core element of patriarchy by being involved in the fighting war. Coupled with these issues will be the concerns and challenges while accessing post-war resources such as ration or veterans' benefits for women veterans. Finally, the critical question remains as to whether or not gender parity for women in active service will be visible in post-war Ukraine.

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