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CHANGE IN GENDER ROLES

THE PARTICIPATION OF BULGARIAN WOMEN IN WORLD WAR II

Introduction

The paper discusses a topic, unstudied in Bulgarian historiography until now from the perspective both of military history and the history of women. We intend to use as a framework formal documents (statistics and archival documents) and press materials, but will mainly base our discussion on alternative sources such as published and unpublished memoirs of women veterans, private correspondence and photographs.

The first objective of the paper is to highlight the role of the ideological motivation of women volunteers (most of them were followers of the Communist ideology) in the final stage of World War II (September 1944 - May 1945). We will do that with an overview of the place of women in the Bulgarian Resistance movement (1941-1944): as guerilla fighters, participants in battle groups in the cities, supporters of guerilla fighters (*yataks*), propaganda workers, and high ranking Communist figures. Second, the paper will study women's activity at the fronts (their participation in military compounds and service as nurses and orderlies) and in back areas (as activists of the ruling coalition, the Fatherland Front, in collecting food and clothing for soldiers at the front). In all these activities a substantial change in female gender roles can be observed.

State of Research

The current state of research regarding women and war consists of publications of sources (documents, memoirs, visual evidence), and of research on women's participation in military actions. These studies are mostly from the period 1944-1989. They are written primarily by military historians who observe women's participation in World War II in terms of the acqui-

sition of the army, military operations, and the state of logistics units.¹ A few of the publications aimed particularly at women.² During that period and in the 1990s some memories of women veterans were also published.³ But they were written by women with communist beliefs, which focused mainly on their motivation and on heroism (their own and their female fellows). We should not ignore the fact that the published memoirs are the product of self-censorship and have gone through state censorship. Therefore they cannot be used (with some exceptions) as ego-documents: hardly any descriptions of emotions and gender experiences, or expressions of their own sexuality could be found. Unfortunately, even after 1989 in Bulgaria no memories were collected and published like the best experience in Russia (for example, Svetlana Alekseevich's book "The War's Unwomanly Face"). In this context, existing publications, though politically unsuitable, can be used for their data and major conclusions.

On the other hand, women's and gender studies in Bulgaria have a very short history. In the 1970s some surveys on the women's communist movement were issued. They are conducted after the mid-1990s and have so far focused on several research areas: feminism and feminist organizations; education, cultural activities and associations; charity and social work. Until now the participation of Bulgarian women in the war has not been the subject of special studies from the perspective of women's history. In 2011, long after our conference, a publication of Nikolai Vukov was issued.⁴

¹ Ivan Tucheв, *Istoriya na Otechestvenata vojna na Balgaria, 1944-1945* [*History of the Patriotic War, 1944-1945*], vol. 1-2 (Sofia: Voenno izdatelstvo, 1982); thereafter Tucheв, *Istoriya*; Boris Nikolov, *Istoriya na Otechestvenata vojna na Balgaria, 1944-1945* [*History of the Patriotic War, 1944-1945*], vol. 3 (Sofia: Voenno izdatelstvo, 1983); thereafter Nikolov, *Istoriya*; Boris Stojnov, 'Bojnite grupi – edna ot formite na vaoryzhenata borba na balgarskii narod protiv fashizma, 1941-1944' ['Battle Groups - a Form of Armed Struggle of Bulgarian People against Fascism, 1941-1944'], *Istoricheski pregled* [*Historical Review*], 4 (1959), 132-56. Thereafter Stojnov, 'Bojnite'.

² Dimitrina Stereva, *Balgarkata v Otechestvenata vojna* [*Bulgarian Women in World War II*] (Sofia: Voenno izdatelstvo, 1975). Thereafter Stereva, *Balgarkata*. Mehmedsaid Saidov, 'Uchastieto na zhenite ot Shumenski okrag v antifashistkata borba' ['Participation of Women from Shumen County in the Antifascist Struggle'], *Godishnik na muzeite v Severna Balgaria* [*Anniversary of Museums in Northern Bulgaria*], 6 (1981), 165-71. Thereafter Saidov, 'Uchastieto'.

³ Evgenieva Tsvetana, *Na vojna bez povikvatelna* [*Volunteers on the Front*] (Sofia: Profizdat, 1985); Genka Zidarova, *Shogom, frontova mladost* [*Goodbye, Our Front Youth*] (Sofia: Voenno izdatelstvo, 1990); Petko Radoev, *Zheni v shineli* [*Women in Military Coats*] (Sofia: P. Radoev, 1993). Thereafter Radoev, *Zheni*.

⁴ See Nikolay Vukov, 'The Aftermaths of Defeat: The Fallen, the Catastrophe, and the Public Response of Women to the End of the First World War in Bulgaria', in Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *Women's Movements and Female Activists in the Aftermath of War: International Perspectives 1918-1923* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2011), 29-47.

There he analyzes the role of women and women's movements in Bulgarian public life between World War I and World War II. It focuses on public commemorations and discourses related to deaths in the war.

Bulgarian Women in the Interwar Period (1919 – 1939)

A radical change in the social status and activities of Bulgarian women took place after World War I. First, their educational opportunities were expanded. In the 1920-1930s many rural elementary schools and mixed schools in small towns were founded, and the number of professional female schools increased. At the same time, new female high schools opened their doors and new faculties at the Sofia University were founded.⁵

Bulgarian women had been entering the labor market en masse. The very first steps were in 1915-1919 when women substituted for mobilized men. The postwar situation forced many widows, female orphans, and unmarried women to start supporting themselves. They organized an Open doors movement, aiming to ensure unrestricted access to employment. The rationalization of industrial labor after 1926 facilitated the penetration of women in the labor market and for the feminization of certain enterprises in light industry. Despite the special protections of women's labor rights, women continued to be lower paid and unskilled.⁶

During the interwar period Bulgarian women achieved notable professional mobility, vertically and horizontally. They were appointed to high positions in ministries, hospitals, and schools. Women entered previously inaccessible institutions and male professions (e. g. engineering and architecture).⁷

The Bulgarian feminist movement made progress, too. Female associations were created based on common occupations and common interests. Some of these associations became members of international alliances. The

⁵ Georgeta Nazarska, *Universitetskoto obrazovanie i balgarskite zheni, 1879-1944* [University Education and Bulgarian Women, 1879-1944] (Sofia: IMIR, 2003).

⁶ Dimitar Nikolov, 'Zhenskijat naemen trud sled Parvata svetovna vojna' ['Female Wage Labor after World War I'], *Mlada balgarka* [Young Bulgarian Woman], 9-10 (1943), 39-40. Journal *Mlada balgarka* (1940-1943), editors in chief Milka Kodjabasheva and Dimitrana Ivanova), was issued by the Bulgarian female intellectuals involved in the boards of the Bulgarian Women's Union and the Bulgarian Association of University Women. Its objectives were to publish materials for "education, public life and home culture" of young women.

⁷ Georgeta Nazarska, 'Dostapat na zhenite do balgarskata universitetska nauka, 1918-1944' ['Women's Access to Bulgarian University Science, 1918-1944'], *Istoricheski pregled* [Historical Review], 5-6 (2005), 116-47.

left wing of the Bulgarian feminist movement became more active. It was led by the illegal Bulgarian Communist Party. In 1937-1938 Bulgarian women obtained suffrage. Although it was a passive right to vote and restricted by the marital status of women, it was a great success of the Bulgarian Women's Union.⁸

Bulgarian Women and Bulgaria's Participation in World War II (May 1940 – September 1944)

As World War II began, the Bulgarian government took steps to prepare the population. In May 1940 the Civil Mobilization Act was passed. It obliged all citizens aged 16-70, irrespective of their gender, to serve the state. With the assistance of the Directorate for Civil Mobilization Bulgarian women were appointed to positions typically reserved for men: in trade, industry, agriculture, health care, transport, air defense, and education. Women were affiliated with economic committees in the villages and participated in the management of agricultural cooperatives. In the 1940s a number of military training camps for civilians were created.⁹ Feminist organizations also played a role in activating women. They proposed to the government to establish a Central Women's Committee affiliated to the Directorate for Civil Mobilization. According to the draft of the proposal, the Committee's local branches had to assist families of mobilized men, collect benefits and set up public kitchens for the poor.¹⁰ Women's organizations activities were still in the field of traditional feminism and charity.

On March 1, 1941 Bulgaria became a formal ally of the Tripartite Pact but the government refused to submit Bulgarian Jews to German concentration camps (1943). Bulgarian troops did not fight on the Eastern Front against the USSR. To fulfill its obligations as an ally, the Bulgarian government and the Bulgarian Red Cross set up a sanitary train and a field

⁸ Krasimira Daskalova, 'Balgarskata nacionalna darzhava, modernizacijata i politicheskoto grazhdanstvo na zhenite, 1878-1944/1947' ['Bulgarian Nation State and Political Citizenship of Women, 1878-1944/1947'], *Kritika i humanizam [Critics and Humanism]*, 30 (2009), 179-200; Tsveta Todorova, *BKP i zhenskoto komunisticheskoto dvizhenie v Balgaria, 1919-1944 [Bulgarian Communist Party and the Female Communist Movement in Bulgaria, 1919-1944]* (Sofia: Partizdat, 1982), 31-33.

⁹ Bosilka Simeonova, 'Zhenata vav voenno vreme' ['The Woman in Wartime'], *Mlada balgarka [Young Bulgarian Woman]*, 2 (1940), 9; Milka Kodzhabasheva, 'Kooperativnata mobilizacija na zhenat' ['Cooperative Mobilization of Woman'], *Mlada balgarka [Young Bulgarian Woman]*, 6-7 (1940), 29.

¹⁰ Milka Kodzhabasheva, 'Zhenata pri grazhdanskata mobilizacija' ['The Woman in Civil Mobilization'], *Mlada balgarka [Young Bulgarian Woman]*, 2 (1940), 2.

surgical hospital for humanitarian assistance to the wounded German and Allied soldiers.¹¹ All nurses in the train and the hospital were alumni from the Female Nursing School, but hospital attendants were run by the Bulgarian Red Cross.¹²

The Bulgarian field hospital (*Raserve Kriegslazarett*) was located in Jablonna, Legionowo County, near Warsaw. The staff of the hospital consisted of 96 people, 14 of them were women (nurses and hospital attendants).¹³ Over time, the Bulgarian hospital in Jablonna treated hundreds of wounded and sick soldiers.

The Bulgarian sanitary train was composed of 16-17 cars. It was equipped with specialized equipment and its route was Warsaw – Riga – Leningrad – Sevastopol – Kiev. Over 30 Bulgarian doctors, including 6 nurses and hospital attendants cared for Germans, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Romanians, and Italians, military men and civilians, wounded and sick.¹⁴ Patients were treated not only when the train stopped at a station, but often when the train was in motion. Along the route the train came under fire or crossed land mines placed by Polish partisans. In these difficult conditions nurses showed remarkable professionalism and took care of sick and wounded men.¹⁵

Participation of Bulgarian Women in the Communist Resistance Movement (June 1941 – September 1944)

During World War II Bulgaria was an ally of the Tripartite Pact but was not occupied by the Nazi troops. However, after June 1941 the Communist Party, acting on demands of the Soviet Union, organized a Resistance movement. It consisted of followers and members of the Communist Party and its subsidiaries from different social strata – peasants, workers, and intellectuals. The movement was led by the Communist International and

¹¹ Bogdan Filov, *Dnevnik [Diary]* (Sofia: OF, 1990), 403-4.

¹² Nurses were recruited after completion of one of the 4 Nursing Schools of the Bulgarian Red Cross. The first one was founded in 1900 in Sofia with the participation of Russian specialists, but in the 1930s it was reformed by the Americans. The training course was 3 years. See Miladin Apostolov and Penka Ivanova, *Istoria na meditsinata I sestrunstvo [History of Medicine and Nursing]* (Sofia: Gorex Press, 1998).

¹³ Spas Razbojnikov, *Balgarskijat cherven krast na Istochnija front, 1941-1945 [Bulgarian Red Cross on the Eastern Front, 1941-1945]* (Sofia: Literaturno forum, 1996), 29-31, 64. Thereafter Razbojnikov, *Balgarskijat*.

¹⁴ Razbojnikov, *Balgarskijat*, 9, 98, 106.

¹⁵ Razbojnikov, *Balgarskijat*, 144.

its President Georgi Dimitrov, and by the Military Committee affiliated to the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

Many Bulgarian women participated actively in the Resistance movement.¹⁶ Bulgarian women were driven by different motives: their own belonging to the working class, their participation in trade unions, in student or youth Communist societies, their membership in the Communist Party and their training in Communist schools in the Soviet Union. Some Jewish women were inspired by repressions against the Jewish minority in the early 1940s. In the 1930s most Bulgarian women were attracted to the Communist women's movement. Communist women's groups covered industry, students' associations, tourist circles, temperance societies, choirs, etc.¹⁷ The Resistance movement consisted of women with different social backgrounds, education, occupation, marital status, and nationality (Bulgarian, Jewish, and Armenian).

Bulgarian women participated in the armed Resistance in various ways: they worked in leading positions in the Communist underground structures, participated in battle sabotage and diversionary groups; supported partisans; entered guerrilla detachments, squads and brigades; and were politically imprisoned.

Many women were elected to leadership roles in the illegal Communist Party, and were tasked with organizing and managing the Resistance movement. Such participation of women in the leadership of Bulgarian political parties was happening for the first time. It can be explained by the Communist ideology that promoted gender equality and wider participation of women in the Resistance movement. Until World War II women could establish their own groups within the right-wing parties and participated equally in the left-wing parties but had never incorporated their own governing bodies. In 1941-1944, Tsola Dragoycheva (1898-1993) was elected

¹⁶ It was quite different from its analogues in the Balkans, and in central and western Europe: Bulgaria was not occupied by the Nazi troops; the Resistance was led by the Communist Party and in the early 1940s consisted of a small number of followers; Bulgaria had some anti-Semitic restrictions, but Bulgarian Jews were not sent to concentration camps. For an overview compare Richard J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Fred B. Chary, *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940-1944* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972); Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975); Michael Bar-Zohar, *Beyond Hitler's Grasp: The Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews* (Holbrook: Adams Media Corporation, 1998); Evguenia Kalinova and Iskra Baeva, *La Bulgarie contemporaine entre l'Est et l'Ouest [Contemporary Bulgaria between the East and the West]* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

¹⁷ Zdravka Vodenicharova and Nevena Popova, *Revoljutsionното zhensko dvizhenie v Balgaria [Revolutionary Women's Movement in Bulgaria]* (Sofia: OF, 1972), 177-88. Thereafter Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionното*.

to the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Both she and Yordanka Chankova (1911-1944) were elected members of the Central Committee. Yordanka Chankova and Liliana Dimitrova (1918-1944) led the Communist youth organization, called RMS, and several women were appointed leaders of the Communist Party district committees. Additionally, they were all involved in establishing local Resistance committees, in organizing strikes, and in coordinating sabotage actions. As a result, they were prosecuted by police and gendarmes, arrested, sentenced to prison, and sent to internment camps. Some of them were killed in shootouts with police.¹⁸

In 1941 the Communist Party set up its own battle groups (I. e. sabotage or diversionary groups) in the cities where German military units had passed. These battle groups consisted of legal and illegal citizen who were tasked with burning and blowing up military targets and infrastructure sites (warehouses, tanks, trains, bridges etc.), killing politicians and military representatives with pro-Nazi views, and providing intelligence on Bulgarian and German military troops. In 1941-1942 about 358 actions were carried out.¹⁹

From the very beginning of the Resistance, women were involved in battle groups. At first they went with their male counterparts in a group to disguise the intentions, but later used knives and firearms and sometimes even led such groups. If they survived police prosecution, they were usually sent to join the guerrilla squads; others were caught by police and sent to prison. After the war ended many of the women who had died during the Resistance were pronounced “heroes” and became “icons” of the new regime (e.g. Anna Ventura, Violeta Yakova, etc.).²⁰

In 1941-1944 the Communist Resistance established a network of supporters. Among the 2.000 members women, played a key role and a special Women’s Division of the Support Organization was established. Its objectives were: assisting political prisoners (with food, clothes and money), providing guerrilla units with food and weapons, and battle groups with flammable substances.²¹ Assisting with arms supplies and the relationships with illegal and prosecuted persons brought women closer to the ‘male roles’, but other tasks they were performing (laundry, cooking, and sew-

¹⁸ Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 192-93.

¹⁹ Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 197-98.

²⁰ Stojnov, ‘Bojnite’, passim; After 1944, some of these women posthumously were awarded with orders. Various industrial enterprises, schools, kindergartens, pioneering units, streets, squares etc., were named after them. Memories and books were written about them, and short films were made about them.

²¹ Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 196, 213-18.

ing) indicated that even the extreme leftist ideology was looking at women in the traditional way and was attributing to them their 'natural' obligations.

Women supporters (*yataks*) in the villages, who rarely belonged to the Communist Party but sympathized with the cause, supported the Resistance too. Their homes were designed to hide partisans and illegal Communist functionaries. They hid illegal printing presses. Women *yataks* were described by the partisans as "their mothers", i. e. women who fed them, washed and patched their clothes up.²² Because of these traditional and nontraditional roles they were performing, women supporters were arrested, convicted and killed; their homes were burned. Women accused of illegal Communist activities or in supporting the Communist party were punished by the government in various ways: sent to camps and sentenced to prison.

According to published data in 1942, women accounted for 11.9 % (total 887) of all arrested people, in 1943 their rate was 12 % (total 16 489). These proportions are the reciprocal of their participation in the Resistance movement, but also evidence of increased women's political activity, unknown in the 1920-1930s. In April 1944 women represented 4.4 % (total 585) of Bulgarian political prisoners. Women prisoners were sent to women's prisons, sometimes staying there with their baby children.²³

In the 1940s three internment camps for political opponents operated in the country. One of them, "St. Nicholas" nearby Asenovgrad, was female. During 1941-1944, 148 women passed through it. Some of them were high ranking figures of the Communist Party, others were partisan's supporters.²⁴

In 1941 partisan detachments, squads and brigades were successively formed. They involved about 18.000 people with very diverse backgrounds, professions and motivations. By September 1944 women were participating in all guerrilla units. For example, only 9.2 % of the members of "Anton Ivanov" Guerilla Detachment which was active in the Rhodope Mountains were women; 89 women were fighting in the 2nd armed zone,

²² Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 216.

²³ Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 218-20.

²⁴ Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 220-21; Penka Damianova, 'Kraj Rozoviia paraklis' ['Belong the Pink Chapel'], in *Spomeni za razni mesta i godini* [Memoirs from Various Places and Years], available at http://www.omda.bg/bulg/slovo/memoirs/rozoviya_paraklis_1.htm (last visited 6 September 2011).

23 in the 9th armed zone.²⁵ This proves that there were some changes in gender roles, but they did not complete.

Women became partisans motivated not only by their communist beliefs but also after being ordered to do so by political structures. They joined partisan detachments together with their family members (fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, and sisters). The fact that they sometimes took their young children is indicative of the preservation of their traditional gender roles. In the squads women were principally engaged in logistics (cooking, sewing, washing, and bandaged the wounded) but also took some 'male' roles, e. g., appointed as political commissioners (the second most important position after the commander); skirmished with the police and gendarmes like men; sacrificed themselves for the team. Such examples can be found in the biographies of women partisans Kalina Veskova ("Chavdar" Brigade), Vela Peeva ("Anton Ivanov" Guerilla Detachment), Zhechka Karamfilova (Guerilla Detachment of Varna) and others.²⁶

Participation of Bulgarian Women at the Front in the War against Nazi Germany (September 1944 – May 1945)

After the political change in Bulgaria in September 1944 the new government decided that Bulgaria should participate in the final stage of the war in Europe and raised the slogan: "Everything for the front, everything for victory!"

Bulgarian participation in the war against Nazi Germany had two phases. Initially, the Bulgarian army conducted campaigns in Macedonia and Serbia, later it liberated part of northern Yugoslavia, Hungary and reached the foot of the Alps. During the first phase the Bulgarian army launched four offensive operations against the Nazis under the command of the Third Ukrainian Front. During the second phase, as part of the Red Army, Bulgarian troops participated in a defensive and an offensive operation.²⁷

²⁵ Doncho Donchev, 'Niakoi sociologicheski nabliudeniya varhu sastava na partizanskija otriad "Anton Ivanov" ot II VOZ' ['Some Sociological Observations on Membership of "Anton Ivanov" Guerilla Detachment from 2nd Military Zone'], *Izvestia na Instituta po istoria na BKP [Proceedings of the Institute of History of the Bulgarian Communist Party]*, 21 (1969), 211. Thereafter Donchev, 'Niakoi'.

²⁶ Donchev, 'Niakoi', 197-215; Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 198-213; Saidov, 'Uchastieto', passim.

²⁷ See Tuchevev, *Istoriya*; and Nikolov, *Istoriya*. Although published 30 years ago, these titles are still valid in Bulgarian historiography, because of the facts they consist of. Since 1989, the Bulgarian military historians have revised their theses on the participation of

According to the Bulgarian Military Service Act women could not serve in the army. Therefore, Bulgarian military authorities were surprised by the large number of women volunteers. Commanders received instructions to reject minor age volunteers. However, women who wished to participate in the war circumvented the restrictions of the military authorities and submitted false documents. The gender ratio in the divisions was not regulated, but women had to be aged 18-45 years. Younger girls were accepted with the permission of their parents. Everyone had to prove that they had not participated in the so-called fascist organizations.²⁸

Bulgarian military authorities placed women in the guard divisions of the infantry. All women underwent a 30-day preliminary military training. Those who were assigned to military hospitals completed special training courses for nurses and hospital attendants as well. Women volunteers who had participated in the armed Resistance movement as partisans were sent straight to the front. The new government trusted them, and they used guerilla experience as its own symbolic capital.

4.218 Bulgarian women participated in the War against Nazi Germany. The largest number of them (about 17 %) were part of the guard and volunteer units. These units were made up of former partisans, members of battle groups, and political prisoners. During the first phase of the war about 3.700 women participated in the three Bulgarian armies totaling 450.000 people. Among them were: 720 women in combat units, 930 in front hospitals and 2.050 in the divisional and district hospitals. Women in combat units served as archers, scouts, gunners, machine gunners, actresses in front theaters, hospital attendants in logistics, etc.²⁹ During the second phase of the war, 518 Bulgarian women served in the army: 95 were in combat units, 395 were doctors, nurses and hospital attendants, and 28 were actresses and war correspondents in the Cultural Department of the General Staff of the Army.³⁰ During the two phases of the war against Nazi

Bulgaria in the final phase of World War II. They affirmed the view that the war was not 'patriotic' but aimed to gain a better political status for the country (as an ally of the Atlantic coalition). Unfortunately, these ideas are still not reflected in the general collection; they are published in various books and articles.

²⁸ Tsentralen voenen arhiv [Central Military Archive], coll. 49, op. 11, a.e. 126, 105.

²⁹ Stereva, *Balgarkata*, 29.

³⁰ Dimitrina Stereva, 'Uchastieto na zhenite v Otechestvenata vojna, 1944-1945 g.' ['Women's Participation in World War II, 1944-1945'], *Izvestija na Voennoistoricheskoto nauchno druzhestvo* [Proceedings of the Military Historical Scientific Society], 13 (1972), 152. Thereafter Stereva, 'Uchastieto'.

Germany, 6 women were killed and 2 others died of their wounds before the war was over.³¹

In the autumn of 1944 women participated in all four offensive operations of the Bulgarian army, storming bunkers, trenches and hideouts of the Nazi troops. Women also participated as hospital attendants caring for the wounded soldiers. In some cases, women provided water to cool overheated barrels of machine guns or brought ammunition to the soldiers during battles.³²

Commanders often sent women soldiers behind frontlines to reconnoitre the location, size and armament of enemy troops. Sometimes women captured enemy soldiers and officers. A few women were elected to be standard-bearers; as usual, these were former partisans and members of battle groups.³³

During the first phase of the war a squad existed formed entirely of women and commanded by a woman and former partisan, Valka Tashevskia. She died on the battlefield after being lethally wounded when trying to destroy a Nazi tank. Tashevskia was promoted to lieutenant, awarded a gold "For Courage" Order, first class, and became the first woman raised to officer's rank in the Bulgarian Army.³⁴ Definitely her image was exploited by the communist propaganda after the war, but it is an indisputable fact that she made a breakthrough in the understanding of the army as a 'male space' and of the war as a 'male work'.

Bulgarian Army women became role models for the strength and determination to win. For the bravery they demonstrated some were awarded orders and medals, others were promoted to higher military ranks.

About 518 women from the 1st Bulgarian Army participated in the Battle of Drava (March 6-22, 1945). Some of them had participated in the first phase of the war. In those defensive operations, women were usually in the most dangerous positions and fully performed 'male' gender roles. For example, Tinka Grabcheva of the 41st Infantry Regiment did not leave the fortified positions until the end of the battle. In ten months she took off her boots only three times. The memoirs of her mates described her as brave and someone capable of calming down her male colleagues. She provided first aid to them while saying: "Behave like a man, what is this whining!"

³¹ Tosko Hristozov, *Imena, izsecheni v stomana* [Names Carved in Steel] (Sofia: Voenna izdatelstvo, 1983).

³² Tsvetana Evgenieva, *Na vojna bez povikvatelna* [Volunteers on the Front] (Sofia: Profizdat, 1985).

³³ Stereva, 'Uchastieto', 144.

³⁴ Stereva, 'Uchastieto', 147.

Shame on you!”³⁵ Women from the General Staff and from the divisions’ headquarters helped officers but during battles they were at the front lines where they worked as hospital attendants.³⁶

About 930 women were involved as nurses, hospital attendants, administrative staff in hospitals, etc., during the first phase of the war. Severely injured patients that required long term treatment were sent to military hospitals in Bulgaria. For example, all 16 military hospitals that existed in Sofia were staffed by female volunteers.³⁷

During the second phase of the war about 81 of 95 women soldiers (84.3 %) were hospital attendants. Most of them served in hospitals and dressing stations where they assisted doctors. In the 2nd Military Surgical Hospital 12 women worked. 2.599 sick and injured soldiers and soldiers with frostbite injuries passed through the hospital from September 1944 to May 1945. As a result of the care provided by the nurses the mortality rate was reduced to 1.6 %.³⁸

On April 5, 1945, when the new alumni of the Female Nursing School graduated, a group of 32 hospital attendants were immediately sent to the front.³⁹ Thanks to the care and blood transfusions they provided, hundreds of wounded soldiers were saved.⁴⁰

During the second phase of the war a number of female war correspondents and actresses were part of the Cultural Department of the General Staff. Five war correspondents were involved in the issue of the *Frontovak* newspaper, a publication of the First Bulgarian Army, and of the comic *Chasovoj* newspaper. They also worked on some divisional and regimental newspapers and promotional boards.⁴¹

Three theater companies were sent to the front in Hungary. Out of the total staff of 74, 21 (28 %) were women.⁴² Actors performed during breaks between battles and in hospitals in front of wounded soldiers.⁴³

³⁵ Stereva, ‘Uchastieto’, 154; Radoev, *Zheni*.

³⁶ Tsentralen darzhaven arhiv [Central State Archives, hereafter abbreviated CSA], coll. 763, op. 2, a.e. 88, 132.

³⁷ CSA, coll. 7, op. 1, a.e. 141, 208; Genka Zidarova, *Shogom, frontova mladost* [Goodbye, Our Front Youth] (Sofia: Voenno izdatelstvo, 1990).

³⁸ Narodna vojska [National Army Newspaper], no. 279, 26 June 1945.

³⁹ Central Military Archive, coll. 3, op. 3, a.e. 58, 17-18.

⁴⁰ Central Military Archive, coll. 3, op. 3, a.e. 58, 157.

⁴¹ Frontovak [Soldier Newspaper], no. 104, 29 May 1945.

⁴² Georgi Stamatov, ‘Teatarat na vojna’ [‘Theatre of War’], *Balgarski voin* [Bulgarian Soldier Magazine], 4 (1955), 18.

⁴³ Otechestven front [Fraternal Front Newspaper], no. 23, 26 November 1944; Otechestven front, no. 1184, 3 June 1945.

Activity of Bulgarian Women in the Back Areas during the War against Nazi Germany (September 1944 – May 1945)

After the military *coup d'état* on September 9, 1944 and the invasion of the Red Army Fatherland Front (FF), the center-left coalition dominated by the Communist Party came to power in Bulgaria. In October 1944 the Government issued a Gender Equality Decree, according to which Bulgarian women received full civil and political rights.⁴⁴ This was the result of not only the longstanding efforts of the Bulgarian feminist movement and the leftist ideology of the ruling parties, but a strategic step by the government to constitute women as an important factor in the proposed political and social changes. Indeed, the acquisition of full civil rights motivated many women to support the initiatives of the new government, including the participation of Bulgaria in the final phase of World War II. Understandably the press wrote: "The activity of women is extraordinary. [...] Never before has there been such a widespread [...] movement on their part."⁴⁵

At the same time a radical change began in the Bulgarian feminist movement. The Board of the Bulgarian Women's Union (the main feminist organization founded in 1901 and a member of the International Council of Women) was removed and put in jail. It was replaced with representatives of the ruling coalition and became a mass state-controlled association. Lots of rural branches were established: there were 980 branches with 94.200 members (1944); and 2.373 branches (65 % in villages) with 200.000 members (1945).⁴⁶ The Bulgarian Women's Union was already setting further political tasks, including the work by women in support of the fronts. Just a year later, in June 1945, the Bulgarian Women's Union transformed into the Bulgarian National Women's Union (BNWU), a mass organization of a totalitarian type placed completely under the control of the Communist Party.

⁴⁴ Ivajlo Bojanov Znepolski, *Istoriya na NRB. Rezhimat i obshtestvoto [History of People's Republic of Bulgaria. The Regime and the Society]* (Sofia: IIBM, 2009), 99; Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 234.

⁴⁵ Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 237.

⁴⁶ Krasimira Trifonova, 'Harakter i organizacionno razvitie na BNZhS, 1944-1950' ['Characteristics and Organizational Development of Bulgarian National Women's Movement, 1944-1950'], *Izvestia na Instituta po istoria na BKP [Proceedings of the Institute of History of the Bulgarian Communist Party]*, 47 (1982), 282; Iliyana Marcheva, 'Zhenskoto dvizhenie v Balgaria i negovata sadba prez perioda septemvri 1944 – iuni 1945 g.' ['Women's Movement in Bulgaria and its Fate during September 1944 – June 1945'], *Minalo [Past]*, 1 (1995), 73; thereafter Marcheva, 'Zhenskoto'. Asen Kalinkov, *Pomoshtnoto dvizhenie v Balgaria, 1944-1945 [Support Movement in Bulgaria]* (Sofia: OF, 1969), 51. Thereafter Kalinkov, *Pomoshtnoto*.

The FF coalition focused its propaganda on those Bulgarian women who did not belong to the Bulgarian National Women's Union. A Supreme Women's Committee was established with the National Committee of the FF. Shortly afterwards its local branches were formed (September 1944), and female functionaries began spreading propaganda among rural and urban women by carrying the slogan "Everything for the front, everything for victory!"⁴⁷ During the war period (September 1944 – May 1945) the majority of Bulgarian women were under the influence of women's organizations and government propaganda.

At the initiative of and under the control of the BNWU and the female committees of the FF, Bulgarian women were engaged in diverse activities. Those who worked in industrial enterprises attended to the movement to increase productivity by at least 20 % in support of the fronts.⁴⁸

As soldiers were being sent to the front, women organized refreshment points at railway stations and in the cities. Subsequently, they were extremely committed to helping soldiers' families. They provided produce and money, helped with sowing crops and raising children and with applications for state subsidies. At work and at home women played a key role in the preparation of parcels for the front. They visited their neighbors and friends, collected money, sewed clothes and underwear, knitted socks, gloves and sweaters, and cooked.⁴⁹ In her letter to the front Yordanka Gerdeva, a pupil, wrote: "We unravel our blouses to knit sweaters for you".⁵⁰ The prepared packages were usually mailed but in the spring of 1945 female delegations carried them to the frontline, demonstrating the solidarity of the back areas.⁵¹ At the initiative of the BNWU during the first phase of the war four trains with parcels were sent; more than 105.000 parcels were sent during the war.⁵²

⁴⁷ Kalinkov, *Pomoshtnoto*.

⁴⁸ Stoyan Tanev, 'Prinosat na Pomoshtnata organizaciia za materialnoto osiguruvane na BNA po vreme na Otechestvenata vojna, 1944-1945' ['The Contribution of Auxiliary Organization for Providing Bulgarian Army during World War II, 1944-1945'], *Voennoistoricheski sbornik [Military Historical Review]*, 1 (1967), 62-75.

⁴⁹ Vodenicharova and Popova, *Revoljutsionnoto*, 233; Kalinkov, *Pomoshtnoto*, 51-69.

⁵⁰ Stereva, *Balgarkata*, 35.

⁵¹ During the Balkan Wars just so-called Samaritan woman (nurses) had travelled to the front. During World War II female delegations going to the front were driven not by women. This practice was introduced by the Soviet pattern and under the leadership of the Communist Party, the Fatherland Front and the Bulgarian People's Women's Union. Traveling was not an intimate act (e.g., an expression of loyalty and love), but a political demonstration of the unity of the nation.

⁵² Dimitar Stoianov, 'Iz dejnostta na Partiiata i masovite organizacii v Plovdivski okrag v pomosht na fronta prez Otechestvenata vojna' ['From the Work of the Party and Mass Organizations in the Plovdiv Region to Support the Front during World War II'], *Izvestia*

Women in the cities initially visited military hospitals to bring food and furniture for the wounded soldiers but later some of them started working as hospital attendants. In their memories soldiers describe these women as “their mothers” who cared for their hygiene and health.⁵³

Women’s committees with the FF and the Support Organization played an important role in the adoption of about 14.000 children from Yugoslavia in late 1944. As they suffered from a rare skin disease, they were treated in Bulgaria at the expense of the government. Their hospital attendants and governesses until 1948 were mainly Bulgarian women⁵⁴

This background information seems to show the preservation of female gender roles in the back areas. However, we should not overlook the political activity of another group of Bulgarian women. In the spring of 1945, under the influence of the new opposition’s propaganda, women organized protest meetings in villages demanding the end of the war and the return of the army from Hungary.⁵⁵

Conclusions

During World War II, similarly to women in central, eastern and southeastern Europe, Bulgarian women radically changed the traditionally established pattern of gender hierarchy and acquired new gender roles. This was observed both in the back areas and in the front.

Bulgaria participated in World War II as a non-belligerent ally of the Tripartite Pact (1941-1944). In the back areas Bulgarian women replaced mobilized men in the work place and entered the labor market practicing professions formerly dominated by men. They actually expanded the public sphere, a process that had begun during World War I and was developed during the interwar period.

During World War II an armed Resistance movement emerged in the country led by the Communist Party and its leftist political formations. A lot of young women motivated by their political views and social affiliations were involved in its various forms (military groups in the cities and

na Instituta po istoria na BKP [Proceedings of the Institute of History of the Bulgarian Communist Party], 22 (1969), 269-88. Thereafter Stoianov, ‘Iz dejnostta’.

⁵³ Stoianov, ‘Iz dejnostta’.

⁵⁴ Penka Damianova, ‘Za edna izcheznala snimka i za oshte neshto...’ [‘For One Disappeared Photo and Else’], in *Spomeni za razni mesta i godini* [Memoirs from Various Places and Years], available at http://www.omda.bg/bulg/slovo/memoirs/izcheznala_snimka_1.htm (last visited 6 September 2011).

⁵⁵ Marcheva, ‘Zhenskoto’, 71-72.

guerrilla forces). Some of them were killed, others landed in prisons or internment camps and others remained outlaws until political change. The participation in the Resistance became for many of them a decisive factor in their appointments as high ranking officials and political functionaries after 1944. For others it resulted in a higher social status. Women who died as partisans, supporters or members of military groups were canonized by the Communist propaganda and proclaimed as national heroines. They entered the national pantheon already equal to men.

By 1944 Bulgarian women had participated in the national liberation movement and in the wars in their 'traditional' gender roles. During the 19th century they had been included in paramilitary formations, preparing ammunition, sewing flags and clothes for the rebels. During the four wars that Bulgaria led after the Liberation (1878) – the Serbo-Bulgarian War (1885), the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and World War I (1915-1919) – hundreds of women became nurses and hospital attendants in the back areas. Many of them were awarded military orders and medals, some were elevated in rank.⁵⁶ These 'traditional' roles continued to exist in 1944-1945: the majority of female volunteers were employed as hospital attendants, cooks, actresses, correspondents, and managers, i. e., away from danger and death. Women from the back areas also preserved their 'traditional' functions.

A significant change of gender roles can be seen in two aspects. The first aspect is the participation of women as soldiers at the front. Ever since entering the army, women made efforts to make up for the lack of military skills and experience, to gain physical strength and to catch up with their male colleagues. Some of them did this with courage and perseverance: they made long trips, participated in fights, bore difficult terrain and weather conditions, slept in the open trenches, carried stretchers with wounded soldiers and died like male soldiers. They compensated for their weaker physique with their will and spirit. That is why memories of female war survivors paint two main perceptions of the war – the horror of death and the smell of blood.

If during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) only 4 women volunteers fought at the front, by May 1945 about 815 women participated in military operations equally with men, and some of them were killed or died of their wounds. About 33 of them were awarded the highest military honor, the "For Courage" Order.

The second aspect of the significant change was the increasing political activity of Bulgarian women. It was not comparable to the feminist move-

⁵⁶ Ivan Stoychev, 'Zheni, kavaleri na ordena "Za hrabrost"' ['Women Chevaliers of "For Courage" Order'], *Izrev [Sunrise]*, 6 May 1948.

ment in the previous period and brought civil and political benefits for women, i. e., equalization of genders and participation in government.

However the policy of equality, which guided the Communist government in 1944-1989, was not argued with the participation of Bulgarian women in World War II. This policy was inspired mainly by the Soviet model and the program of the Communist Party. As a result, it creates the image of woman as worker, social activist and mother. Bulgarian women received full suffrage (1944); by the 1980s almost all women worked outside the home, their educational status increased, they had access to all political and other state organizations.⁵⁷

Postwar biographies and careers of women who had participated in World War II were different. Many used this symbolic capital to continue their education and carve successful political and professional careers for themselves. However, almost none of them remained in the Bulgarian army as officers and were not appointed to higher ranks. Until 1989, the command staff was composed entirely of men. An interesting fact is also that women were allowed a minimal involvement in the so-called Union of Fighters Against Fascism and Capitalism. They were displaced by men, some of whom did not even participate in the Resistance movement.⁵⁸

The fate of women who worked in the field hospital and in the sanitary train of the Bulgarian Red Cross in Poland and Ukraine was dramatic. Doctors and nurses were accused of “fascist action” and were discharged from Bulgarian hospitals.⁵⁹

Future studies on this issue are needed. They should attract new sources and consider the war and women’s participation in it from the gender perspective, namely: to explore changes in the construction and expression of female identity in wartime and the front line; to study issues of sexuality and marital relations; to focus on the impact of war on the power positions of women.

⁵⁷ See Johanna Deimel, ‘Bewegte Zeiten – Frauen in Bulgarien gestern und heute’ [‘Moving Times – Women in Bulgaria Yesterday and Today’], *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft in Südosteuropa*, 13, 1 (1998), 71-85; Ulf Brunnbauer, ‘Die sozialistische Lebensweise’: *Ideologie, Gesellschaft, Familie und Politik in Bulgarien (1944-1989)* [‘Socialist mode of living’: *Ideology, Society, Family and Politics in Bulgaria (1944-1989)*] (Wien: Böhlau, 2007); Karin Taylor, ‘Our Own Rhythm of Life – Young People and Marriage in Bulgaria in the 1960s and 70s’, in Klaus Roth, ed., *Sozialismus: Realitäten und Illusionen* [Socialism: Realities and Illusions] (Vienna: Institute of European Ethnology, 2005), 155-68.

⁵⁸ See Milena Angelova, *(Ne) spodelenata pamet na kasnia sotsializam. Dvizhenieto “Narodnata pamet razkazva”, 1983-1989* [(Not) shared Memory of Late Socialism. The “People’s Memory Says” Movement, 1983-1989] (Sofia: Semarch, 2010), 86-90.

⁵⁹ Razbojnikov, *Balgarskijat*, 11, 89.