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Military Women in World Cinema

*A 20th Century History
and Filmography*

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Introduction

A significant amount of scholarship has been devoted to depictions of women in war in a variety of mediums, ranging from poetry to novels to film. While many focus on women's contributions on the home front, others recognize women's service as official and unofficial members of military fighting forces around the world. From the earliest days of motion pictures, the contributions of women to the military cause have been depicted in films, not just those made in Hollywood, but in studios in nations from around the world. In most cases, scholarship on the subject has focused on popular films such as *G.I. Jane*, *A Few Good Men*, and *Sink the Bismarck!*, exploring issues of gender, femininity, and/or the social norms affirmed or violated by the women in question. Few consider women's roles in early war films, and even fewer consider military women's roles in non-war films. This book is the first to explore the ways in which military women from nations around the world were depicted in theatrical and television films of the twentieth century. It includes films about World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, and numerous national conflicts from around the world, as well as films that address the day-to-day life of military personnel in times of peace.

In order for a film to be included in this book, the film must have at least one military woman with a speaking role as a member of the cast, whether credited or not. The survey includes theatrical releases, as well as films released directly to video or initially created for television, but not television series, mini-series, or documentaries, and it does not include discussions of non-military women, such as Red Cross workers, contract and volunteer nurses, or ambulance drivers, who were so important during World War I but not official military personnel.

The book explores depictions of military women in a wide range of genres beyond the traditional war film, including comedies, thrillers, romances, and science fiction, comparing these depictions to the realities under which actual women in these positions functioned in society at the time of the conflict or time period depicted. Films often reflect official policies and/or public opinion about social issues, and many of these films mirror a nation's ambivalence toward, support of, rejection of, and acceptance of a variety of issues relevant to the status of women in the military. The portrayals of military women in these films cover a variety of professions as well, many of which were outside socially acceptable norms of the day, and the analyses discuss the realities of the women's position in relation to their experiences in the military and the social norms to which they were subjected. It

examines the challenges the women faced as they broke through the barriers that prevented their full military service, the tropes used to depict a variety of character types, the ways in which depictions of military women varied by film genre, and the ways in which non-traditional female characters were accepted by the viewing public. A complete filmography of the works included in this book can be found in Appendix A, and a list of the countries whose films are explored can be found in Appendix B, along with the number of films examined from each nation. Additionally, Appendix C gives a brief overview of the film industries in each of these countries.

A Short History of Women at War

The idea of women warriors has been part of the culture and literature of nations throughout the West for millennia. Probably the most famous woman soldier is Joan of Arc, the young French peasant who led French troops to victory over the English in the fifteenth century. The Maid of Orleans has been portrayed in literature and film numerous times,¹ but primarily in European films. She appears in several films in this survey, which are discussed in several chapters.

Joan of Arc, however, was only one of many women who fought for a cause. Despite being formally banned from participating in warfare, women have unofficially served in the armies around the world for centuries, often dressing and living as men since they were almost universally excluded from military service. Stories about these cross-dressing women, often purported to be written as autobiographical tales in books such as *Female Marine: The Adventures of Miss Lucy Brewer* and *The Cavalry Maiden: Journals of a Russian Officer in the Napoleonic Wars*, were popular in early nineteenth-century Europe, as were cross-dressing women theatrical performers who frequently portrayed boys on stage. The trend continued in many films of the twentieth century, and several early films featuring cross-dressing women, many of which were silent slapstick comedies, are discussed in Chapter Two; a variety of other films analyzing the phenomenon are examined in subsequent chapters as well.

Cross-dressing presented a problem for early twentieth-century society, especially after World War I, disrupting social norms and questioning culturally assigned gender roles.² To counter this threat to the “natural” social order, filmmakers tended to depict non-medical military women as either super-macho Amazons of questionable sexual orientation, like the female guard in *October*, or as being frail and needy, requiring a man to save them, like Dunyasha in *Little Red Devils*, both films discussed in Chapter Two. This was not true, however, of the earliest filmmakers, as will be discussed shortly.

Military women were not, however, confined to European armies. The tomb of Fu Hao, first consort of Wu Ding, the twelfth ruler of the Shang Dynasty in China, contained 130 bronze weapons among its 1600 burial objects, as well as tortoise shells and ox scapulae with inscriptions heralding her successes as a military general who led thousands of soldiers in battle.³ Recent archaeological activity in Mongolia

has revealed a number of burials of women whose bones showed signs of archery and horseback riding, activities closely linked with warfare, reinforcing the mention of Mongolian warrior women who led armies into battle, described in Chinese, Korean, and Persian texts.⁴ In 1130 CE, Liang Hong Yu fought alongside her husband in a major campaign along the Yangtze River, beating the battle drum and using flags to help guide the army during the fighting. The Ming Dynasty Emperor Chengzhen (1627–1644) wrote poems praising the military exploits of the female general Qin Liang Yu against foreign and domestic enemies.⁵

Their exploits are not, however, as well known as those of Hua Mulan. Mulan was possibly an historical figure—a young woman from China’s Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534 CE)—who donned her disabled father’s armor to fight against the invading Rourani. It is generally accepted that Hua Mulan served in the army, dressed as a man, for twelve years, leading her troops to numerous victories during the tumultuous times, for the most part as a general and ultimately marrying one. Her exploits, recorded in a sixth-century poem, made her a popular folk hero in China. The films about Hua Mulan had political implications at the time of their release. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, the government of the Republic of China sought to modernize the country, which meant throwing off 2,000 years of imperial rule and included weakening the reliance on Confucian doctrine and strengthening the rights of women. Hua Mulan was an excellent symbol, for her cross-dressing warrior persona was a direct contradiction of the Confucian ideal for women, who were expected to be subservient to men from cradle to grave, that the republican government was trying to erase. Her appearance in film is discussed in several chapters of this book.

In 240 CE, Lady Trieu is said to have led Vietnamese troops into battle against the Chinese from atop an elephant. Better known women warriors are the Trung sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, wealthy aristocrats who in 40 CE led a rebellion against the Han Chinese dominance of Vietnam, ruled a section of modern northern Vietnam for almost three years; they died in 42 CE after being captured in battle and beheaded as an example against future rebellions.⁶ Their exploits were included in several Chinese and Vietnamese chronicles, and they are also immortalized in Vietnamese literature.

Additionally, Tomoe Gozen of Japan (1157–1247) earned great praise as a lieutenant in Minamoto no Yoshinaka’s army in the Heian-era work *The Tales of the Heike*. The semi-legendary woman, member of a samurai family, has been celebrated in music, films, historical novels, and art.⁷ Another *onna-musha*, or woman warrior, was the Taira clan general Hangaku Gozen,⁸ who also has been immortalized in art and literature. During both the Kamakura and Sengoku periods, there are also numerous reports of all-female cavalries from western Japan who fought bravely for various daimyos.

While the actual numbers are not known, women also served as combatants, spies, and messengers during the Mexican Revolution. Known as *soldaderas* and later as *adelitas*, they came from all walks of life, often joining the cause for personal safety, for equality, or for their own freedom, and they played a vital role in supporting the rebel cause as well as that of the federales.⁹ While some, like Capitana

Petra Herrera, fought disguised as men, most wore flowing skirts and loose blouses with bandoliers crossed across their chests and rifles slung over their shoulders, earning high ranks as themselves.¹⁰ Several films in the book include depictions of *soldaderas*.

Most people are familiar with the exploits of the Amazons, the female warriors who were first recorded by Homer in *The Odyssey* when Hercules is charged with capturing the girdle of Queen Hippolyta as one of his labors, and later by Herodotus in his *History* and Plutarch in his *Lives*. Herodotus also provided a detailed description of Artemisia, who served as an able sailor and ally to Xerxes during the Persian Wars against the Greeks. Later, the Roman historian Tacitus recorded an ill-fated rebellion against Roman legionnaires in occupied Britain in 60 CE, led by the Celtic queen Boudica. Over time, many women chose to fight for causes in which they believed, often dressed as men. In 1807, Nadezhda Durova was commissioned as a hussar in Alexander I's army, fighting against the French and serving for ten years in the light cavalry.¹¹ The film *Hussar Ballad*, discussed in Chapter Five, tells her story. Countess Constance Markievicz (née Gore-Booth) served as a captain in the Irish Citizens Army, seeing combat during the Easter Rising of 1916.¹²

During World War I, two Romanian women became important to the war effort. Queen Marie (1875–1938), granddaughter of Queen Victoria and first cousin to Russian Tsarina Alexandra, recognized the importance of the nurses who tended the wounded and instituted the Queen Marie Medical Cross to reward the work of medical personnel. While the queen was a visible supporter of the Romanian military, visiting the troops frequently, she was not the most well-known woman associated with the war. Unlike the cross-dressing women who preceded her, Ecaterina Teodoroiu joined the Romanian army after her brother was killed in combat—as herself. While she cut her long hair and wore a tailored men's uniform, she did so without hiding her sex. Wounded twice in battle and promoted to lieutenant during her service, she was killed in action at age twenty-three. Immortalized as a “young girl” and “virgin” so she did not disrupt the masculine norms associated with war, her story was lost under the communist regime in Romania, despite the presence of one monument honoring her service and several films that tell her story.¹³ Since the fall of communism, her presence as a hero has been restored.

Several women also served in the Serbian army as women, which had no restrictions against women serving, although the most famous two were not actually Serbian. Dutch heiress Jenny Merkus enlisted as the Serbs revolted against Turkish rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the late nineteenth century. Wanting to help liberate Christians from Muslim rule, she bought cannons for the rebels and wore a man's uniform while fighting on the front lines.¹⁴ Englishwoman Flora Sandes, who spent a lifetime trying to escape from gender roles imposed on her by society, saw war as an opportunity to experience the freedoms allowed to men. She began her wartime experiences at age thirty-eight as a St. John's ambulance nurse in 1914. Rejected for a position as an ambulance driver due to her sex, she eventually was attached to the ambulance corps of the 2nd Infantry Regiment in Southern Macedonia as a dresser. Committed to the Serb cause, she ultimately joined the Serbian army and was considered a valuable comrade because of her riding and shooting skills. During her

service, she caught typhus but recovered and returned to duty. After the war ended, she traveled the world in search of adventure but returned to Serbia after a few years. She volunteered for service in the Yugoslavian army again at the beginning of World War II but was rejected due to her age.¹⁵ Her story is told in the film *Our Englishwoman*, which is discussed in Chapter Eight.

The Women's Death Battalion was created by Maria Bochkareva, a peasant who joined the 25th Reserve Battalion of the Soviet Army in 1914. Decorated for bravery in battle, in 1917, she convinced the army to allow her to create a battalion of women; in all, 2,000 women between the ages of eighteen and forty answered the call, despite Bochkareva's Draconian methods of discipline. Over time, several women's battalions were formed with 5,000 women soldiers, but they were disbanded after the Russian Revolution.¹⁶ The Women's Death Battalion is shown in several movies discussed in subsequent chapters.

As will be also seen throughout the discussions in this book, beginning with World War II, military women played integral roles in the war effort, albeit more on the side of the Allies than the Axis powers. During World War II, the USSR was the first nation to allow women to fly combat missions, the brainchild of Marina Raskova, who persuaded Stalin in the fall of 1941 to create three female units, better known as the Night Witches, the focus of several films discussed in the book.¹⁷ The units' nickname came from German soldiers who could not sleep due to the wooden and percale biplanes making a loud "whooshing" noise, which sounded like a witch's broom, as they cut their engines and dropped their bombs. The young women flew at night without parachutes or radios; they dropped 23,000 tons of bombs in 30,000 missions over the course of four years, primarily on railway junctions, ammunition dumps, and artillery positions.¹⁸ Flying multiple missions each night in complete darkness, they performed heroic feats in spite of the horrible conditions under which they lived, including being ill-fed like all Soviet soldiers.¹⁹ Despite their successes during the war, the units were dissolved at the end of the war, and Soviet military women were encouraged to marry and have children—and to keep quiet about their war service.

The dissolution of the Soviet women's units at the end of World War II was not an unusual occurrence. While most nations involved in the war had recognized the need for additional manpower to support their efforts and had turned to women to fulfill these needs, once the war ended, most of the women were summarily discharged, expected to return to their traditional domestic roles, even in communist nations where women's equality was purported to be a key tenant of their philosophy. Conflicts during the last half of the century, including Korea, Vietnam, and Algeria, as well as other colonial wars for independence, in some cases led to the limited opening of military positions for women, but women were not the focus of war efforts. It was not until the globalization of women's rights movements in the late twentieth century that women were welcomed into military service in significant numbers.

A Short History of War in Film

Film has been a universal language since its early beginnings when the Lumière brothers popularized the medium around the world in the late nineteenth century. It

has served as a form of entertainment, education, and propaganda, helping to shape public opinion on a variety of political and social issues worldwide, including war, which it can humanize or dehumanize depending on the filmmaker's perspective. Film historians John E. O'Connor and Peter C. Rollins have noted that film can provide an interpretation of an historical event, serve as evidence for social or cultural history, or provide evidence of an historical event by using actual footage of an event.²⁰ War films are often the way in which many people learn about and understand the military, but, as will be seen in the discussions in this book, films about war and members of the military are not always accurate in their representations of military culture.

As previously mentioned, war has been a popular subject of movies since the industry's beginnings. Numerous films have covered virtually every war since the dawn of man, whether real or fictional. Although Louis and Auguste Lumière were instrumental in the enormous growth of the film industry in its early days, their films, less than a minute in length, are most accurately classified as documentaries, covering such topics as fishing, gardening, and swimming at the beach²¹; none of their early works appear to have addressed war. The Thomas Edison Company created a number of silent film shorts based on events from the Spanish-American War in 1899, but these works did not include military women. The apparent earliest extant film depiction of a military woman is in Georges Méliès' silent ten-minute short *Joan of Arc* from 1900. The hand-colored film, discussed in detail in Chapter Two, is primarily staged in the theatrical style favored by Méliès using a stationary camera and painted scenery. While not shown fighting, Joan is attired as a soldier in several scenes, wearing armor and astride a horse, emphasizing her status as the French national hero and martyr.²²

As the film industry grew, filmmakers and governments soon realized the propaganda power of film, especially in times of war. One of the earliest propaganda films is *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), which chronicles the 1905 mutiny on the Russian battleship over the callous actions of the Tsarist government towards its own sailors. Commissioned on the twentieth anniversary of the first Russian Revolution, it reminded viewers of some of the reasons for the Bolshevik Revolution. The film, which is not discussed in these pages because it does not feature any military women, is considered to be one of the greatest films of all time.²³

World War I decimated the European film industry, so few films of any type were produced in the years immediately following the war, giving the untouched American film industry a definite advantage during the 1920s. Both Poland and Germany produced several action films about the war, glorifying their military prowess, some of which are discussed in Chapter Two because they include military women. Rather than glorifying the exploits of military aviators as American films of the period did, these films emphasize the land war, exploring its horrors and the sacrifices of individual soldiers. These war films allowed the audience to experience the horrors of war without the risks associated with being on the front, and the deaths shown onscreen heroicized the soldiers, reminding the audience that their deaths were sacrifices for the national good.

By the 1930s, comedies involving military personnel appeared, popular with the

audiences who looked to films for escape from the hardships brought on by the worldwide depression and a familiar space for those who had fought during the war. Several dramatic war films looked back in time rather than to the war that loomed over Europe. As Hitler's army moved across Europe, newsreels and documentary films made by both sides for propaganda purposes brought the war to the public.²⁴ Much of the "stock" footage used was actually shot by military cameramen during combat.

Films made during World War II gave people on the home front, at least those not actually experiencing the war firsthand, the opportunity to vicariously experience the hardships encountered by loved ones who were fighting. In many cases, even though military women were often on the front lines, they were excluded from the films altogether or were included only as love interests, typically working in traditional roles as wives or nurses. While this is true in many European made films, it is not true for women depicted in films from China, the Koreas, or Vietnam. In those films, the women may bond with some of their male counterparts, but very few can be considered to be involved in a romantic relationship. For the most part, their focus is on the job they are expected to perform and on being good citizens.

In these films, the male heroes are the key figures, proudly standing up when duty calls, accepting the challenge with a sense of honor and serving as role models for others, no matter the consequences. With a few exceptions discussed in the book, these heroic traits are rarely attributed to military women, who typically play minor roles in the films. As will be seen, however, in a number of the films that include military women from many countries and services, women are often required to rise above the assumption that they are weak and dependent and display the same heroic convictions as the men with whom they serve. These new roles were certainly a change for military women—and for many moviegoers as well. Despite many of the women being shown working competently at their appointed jobs and in precarious situations, and often dying on the front lines, many of these characters were still included as love interests for the films' protagonists.

Along with live-action films, film studios in several nations, including the United States, the USSR, Germany, and Japan, began producing animated shorts that were intended to support the war effort. Animation proved to be an excellent propaganda tool, allowing for the injection of humor amid its message of support for the cause. Among the animated shorts produced in the USSR was the 1941 short *Fascist Boots Shall Not Trample Our Motherland*, produced after the German incursion into Soviet territory. It is not discussed in the book since it does not feature military women, but it was intended to help strengthen the Soviet population's resolve against the German invasion. German animation during the war centered on the production of animated maps, primarily created by Svend Noldan. His most famous war-related work, *The World War* from 1925, was a two-part film that used ordnance and geographic maps and moving pointed arrows to show troop movements in various battles from World War I. With the start of World War II, he animated attack and defense maps, along with the battle action sequences for the documentary *Campaign in Poland*.²⁵

Japan produced a number of animated propaganda films, starting with *Momotaro vs. Mickey Mouse* (1934), where the Divine Peach Boy is called on to save

the residents of Peaceful Island from an invasion by Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. In 1945, Momotaro again appeared, this time leading an army of anthropomorphic animals against the invading Americans in *Momotaro's Divine Sea Warriors*. The popular Norakuro, a black anthropomorphic dog designed to compete against Disney's Goofy, joined the war effort in *Private Norakuro* (1935), eventually advancing to the rank of lieutenant in subsequent films as the war wore on. None of these animated films are discussed in this book since they do not include military women characters, although in the 1970 television series, Norakuro did develop a crush on a fluffy female military nurse who appeared in several episodes.

In the years following World War II, films from many nations continued to tell the story of their wartime experiences, and the films often served to familiarize audiences with the ideals espoused by the winning nations, many of which emerged as new players on the world stage. Film became an important tool to educate the population on national policies for many nations, including the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and the Eastern Bloc nations. For the USSR, war films in particular were important to the nation for a variety of reasons. The country came into existence during a time of war (World War I and the Russian Revolution) and ended with the war in Afghanistan. Wars served as an excuse for maintaining the authoritarian state, which used militaristic rhetoric in the organization and ruling of the state, as does North Korea. The state used film to subvert history and to inculcate the population to communist ideals, under the guise of entertainment.²⁶ One of the ways Soviet history has been subverted in film was by downplaying women's contributions to the war effort, heroicizing male participants at the expense of the thousands of women who also fought and died.

In North Korea in the years after the ceasefire for the Korean War, Kim Jong-Il crafted a film theory that lionized his father, brainwashed the population, and helped him become Supreme Leader after his father's death. Included in his theory was the importance of music in storytelling and of having actors honor his father in every film. Kim's films are filled with characters who cheerfully sacrifice themselves for the Great Leader and the nation, with no emphasis on love and little emphasis on family.²⁷

While films from the USSR, China, North Korea, and Yugoslavia continued to explore events from past wars, films from other nations often took a more humorous, nostalgic look at military service in comedies such as the British *Carry On* series and the Danish *Girls at Arms* series, which are discussed in the book. These films looked at the impact of increasing numbers of women in the military and the battle of the sexes. With the advent of the space age, films from Italy, the UK, Canada, and Japan turned their sights to military service in space in such films as the *UFO* series, the *Gamma One Quadrilogy*, and *Space Battleship Yamato*, all of which are also discussed. These films include prominent female characters in military roles that were not yet available to servicewomen in real life but gave women the ability to dream of possibilities that would soon become reality.

Military Women in Film

This book presents a chronological history of depictions of military women in

films from across the globe. Chapter One sets the stage by providing a brief survey of the history of military women in each of the countries whose films are included in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two begins the discussion by examining the earliest war films, those made between 1910 and 1939. Created in black and white by filmmakers in the USSR, the Netherlands, Poland, Germany, and China, among others, the earliest were silent films that featured military women in non-traditional roles as warriors, like Russian women snipers, Romania's hero Ecaterina Teodoroiu, and the Chinese woman general Hua Mulan. For the most part, these women were "good girls" who believed they had a patriotic duty to fight for their country. One interesting trope that began with the earliest of these films was that of women dressing as military men in comedic situations.

As various nations entered World War II, there quickly became a manpower shortage at home as wave after wave of men joined the military. While this provided a great opportunity for women from several countries, including Great Britain, allowing them to serve in roles not traditionally available to them at that time, women from the USSR and China had already been integrated into their military services. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, it is not surprising that filmmakers focused on the global war and subsequent civil wars, many of which depicted women in the military in a variety of roles. During the war years, many films, like *Wings and the Woman*, *Soldier in White*, and *In the Name of the Motherland*, for example, chronicled the experiences of military women during these conflicts.

With World War II and various civil wars fading into memory, life in the post-war world began to transition to a somewhat normal state, and as nations recovered from the devastation, these countries began producing films in larger numbers. The films in Chapter Four, however, show that the wars continued to be fought despite the recovery, as people processed the repercussions of war on national psyches. Some notable exceptions were films that focused on comedy, such as *The Navy Lark* and *Carry On Sergeant*, both of which featured British military women who were more competent than the men around them.

By the 1960s, many military leaders recognized that female military members had made significant contributions during World War II, various civil wars, and the Korean War, and while the number of military women had been dramatically reduced, those who remained continued to show that women could make a difference in the military as they worked to open new jobs to women in all branches of the service. As noted in Chapter Five, war films from this time continued to focus heavily on World War II for their settings, but rather than just concentrating on dramatic events, films like *Petticoat Pirates* and *Carry On Jack* chose to highlight humorous aspects of military service, reflecting the ebullient mood at the time. The number of science fiction films dramatically increased, while the *Elusive Avengers* franchise films were Cold War spy thrillers set during the Russian Revolution.

The 1970s saw a blossoming of theatrical war films around the world, with France, Yugoslavia, Poland, Greece, and others joining the USSR, China, Great Britain, and the Koreas as major film producers. Chapter Six notes that both dramatic and comedic films about World War II were still popular, and works like Denmark's

Girls at Arms and *Girls at Sea* featured military women in a variety of roles. Military women were also involved in Cold War films like *The Spy Who Loved Me*, which gave them the opportunity to show off their intelligence as well as their beauty. Japan's depictions of military women tended to look to the future, rather than the past, in works like the *Space Battleship Yamato* franchise and other science fiction animated features.

As the horrors of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War faded farther from the public's consciousness, filmmakers continued to revisit the wars, producing films like *Night Witches* and *The Flooding Season*, which showed the experiences of the men and women who fought and died during these wars. Chapter Seven notes that many of these films focused on the trials and tribulations women experienced as they adapted to military life, either in boot camp, as in Israel's *Girls* and Taiwan's *The Women Soldiers*, or on the battlefield, like the USSR's *Wartime Romance* and Italy's *Strike Commando*.

As noted in Chapter Eight, the 1990s saw a continuation of interest in films about World War II, numerous civil wars, Korea, and Vietnam from many countries. While women play key roles in some of these films, in others, they remain as minor characters or serve only as a love interest for a male star. As more women entered militaries around the world, some films such as *The Investigator* began to explore important issues of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and gays in the military. The role of women in the military and the bending of gender roles even entered the world of children's films as filmmakers took advantage of the popularity of Disney's *Mulan* by creating their own animated versions of the life of the Chinese warrior. And in science fiction, filmmakers continued to look to the future as they positioned military women in roles of increasing importance.

While warfare was still considered to be the realm of fighting men at the end of the twentieth century, and men's military exploits have been the subject of filmmakers worldwide since the medium's beginnings, women also answered the call to defend their homelands, and as the century progressed, women's military service received increased recognition in film. Their depictions, measured against what was officially authorized at the time of the films' releases, are discussed in the following chapters.