

## The Rear Area in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945): Red Army Men's Wives and Families Struggle for Survival in Yaroslavl

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**Abstract.** The heroic image of the Red Army soldier answering the call of the Motherland to defend her in the Great Patriotic War against fascism has masked the harsh reality of life for their wives and families they left behind on the home front. Wartime propaganda claimed that soldiers' families were being well looked after. But documents from Yaroslavl' archives suggest that the wives and families of ordinary soldiers and officers struggled to survive on the 'second' home front, especially if they had to care for young children.

**Keywords:** Great Patriotic war; Rear area; survival; women; children.

**Introduction.** There is no doubt that the wives and mothers of frontline soldiers in the Great Patriotic war, 1941-1945 were regarded as models of patriotic self-sacrifice and virtue for other women on the home front to emulate. The pages of *Pravda* and *Krasnaya zvezda* frequently reported mothers in particular fair urging their sons to fight the fascists 'to the last drop of blood' on the frontline. Wartime propaganda claimed that soldiers' families were being well looked after. But in reality the home front was a 'second front', where the mothers, wives and families of frontline soldiers often struggled to survive under a harsh regime of scarce food, clothes, heating, and accommodation; a regime that only worsened as the routed Red Army retreated, and continued even after the 1943 victories of Stalingrad and Kursk [1].

**Results.** Like the rest of the Soviet Union, the frontline city of Yaroslavl' and its region endured subsistence conditions resulting in permanent hunger for most of the war years [2]. For those women who could work, the enterprise was a key source of sustenance. For example, from 1941 to 1945 the Yaroslavl' Region Timber Industry administration provided assistance to 10 women employees whose husbands were in the military, '*osobenno nuzhdaiushchikhsa semei nalichiem maloletnykh detei*'. '*Za schet Upravleniia*', these families were '*ezhegodno obespechivaiutsia*' the delivery of wood for heating (*topliv-drov*); individual garden plots with seeds and delivery of the produce to the family residence; manufactured goods (*promtovary*), such as children's boots (*botinki*) and galoshes (*galoshi*); and loans, including for livestock (*skot*) [3].

Such support for working, military wives undoubtedly enabled them to survive, but only just. Moreover, the provision of material support through the enterprise also tied these women to the enterprise or institution, acting as a mechanism for labour and social discipline: abandonment or loss of employment denied access to such essential foods and goods. And, it made these women vulnerable to the goodwill or otherwise of the largely male management. There was real concern from the Yaroslavl' communist party and local authorities from the very start of the war about the welfare of soldiers' families. For example, a '*zakrytogo partiinogo sobraniia*' of the forestry industry, held one week after war broke out, unreservedly condemned an industry administrator for refusing accommodation to the wife and 18-month-old baby of an enterprise driver, who had volunteered immediately for the front. The administrator had refused the woman accommodation on the grounds that it was '*zarezerirovany za Upravdomami i priezhaiushchimi iz raionov*'. As a result, mother and baby were forced to '*skitaetsia po gorodu*' [4].

This mother was not alone. Often it seems, the attitude of enterprise administrators was an important determinant of whether soldier's families received their entitlements, or not. And they could be cruelly cheated. A desperate plea written in winter 1942 by the mother of two young children, E. Vinogradovaia, a worker in the 'Krasnyi Pereval' textile factory, to the editor of the regional newspaper *Severnyi rabochyi*, makes this clear:

*Muzh v Krasnoi Armii. Bylo reshenie obkoma partii kak udeliat' vnimanie na voprosy i nuzhdy semei. U nas fabrike zam. direktora est' Volkov I.Ia. S kakoi pros'boi ne obratis' – vechnyi otvet "Nichego ne znaiu". Sprashivaetsiia. Chem my vinovaty, chto my ostalis' zhenshchiny odni s det'mi. I kto zhe nam pomozhet, kak ne obshchestvennye organizatsii... i adminstratsiia k zaprosom odnositsia ochen' plokho. Ia privedu fakt. U menia net ni polena drov. Ia rabotaiu tselyi den', vypisannye drov mne ne mogut do sikh por, s 28/III-1942 g. Kvartira uzhasno kholodnaia i skvernaia i ne toplena. Vot 8 deni zhivu s det'mi pri temperatura – 8 ... Pust' zabotiatsia nas tak, kak zabotiatsia o semiiakh svoikh i sebe. Vot do chego dovodiat nashi khoziastvenniki... Na vse voprosy i nuzhdy semei krasno armeiskikh chto my ... smogli zhit' spokojnoi i rabotat' ne ko... ruk [5].*

When all other avenues failed, appeals to the editor of *Severnii rabochyi* were one of the means to request food and other goods that were denied not just to the wives of soldiers and officers but even to elite commanders' wives. In late December 1941 E. S. Kiseleva, who had been evacuated with her ill mother and three children (one still breast feeding), complained that although they had been living in a Yaroslavl' region kolkhoz for two months, they had not yet received any 'produkty'. «Нет фондов», Kiseleva was told. She accused the male head of the oblast' evacuation bureau of treating them 'безжалостно, по-бюрократически', denying her and other commanders' wives of access to the special military shops [voentorg]:

Тов. редактор! к этому тяжелому испытанию готовилась страна многие годы, готовились и колхозы и неужели эти колхозы не в состоянии прокормить нас в это тяжелое время. Неужели наши дети должны быть лишены манной крупы и куска сахара, в то время, когда в стране эти продукты есть, когда местное население эти продукты получает. [6].

We do not know whether these desperate women's pleas were met, although the Председателя исполкома tersely reassured the editor that 'эвакуированным оказана помощь, доставлены карточки и другие продукты.' [7].

Testimony to the '*kraine tiazhelom material'nom polozenii*' that army families could fall into, especially if the mother of young children was unable to work, is provided by a communist party report written in the depths of winter, January 1943. Vera Sirova was living in a tiny one-room apartment, in disrepair, with three children aged nine, six and four. Unable to go to work because the children lacked '*obuvi i odezhdy*', she was dependent on an army allowance of 150 roubles per month. So cold was the apartment that '*voda v samovare, v nedre i v karke zamerzala*.' Her promised supply of wood fuel had run out by the end of December. Desperate to warm the children, who sat on the kitchen stove, Sirova broke up and burnt a '*stol, skamerka, detskuiu krovatku, ... zabop ... raznye ... otbroisy*'. Once again, a vulnerable young mother was the victim of bureaucratic neglect. In this case, by the timber industry administrators to whom she had personally appealed, walking every two days to seek their help. None was forthcoming. The administration's party secretary unequivocally recommended a '*strogoe administrativnoe izyskanie*' into the '*bezdushnom otnoshenii*' of those responsible for Sirova's plight [8].

Of course, not all military families were in such desperate circumstances. Women that worked in factories and on *kolkhozy* who exceeded production norms were hailed as models for other women to follow and were rewarded accordingly. In September 1943, eight '*zhen i materei frontovikov*' from the Galicheskii district were praised by the district military commissar for their workplace output and their overall contribution to the war effort. Among them was Antonina Smirnova, an officer's wife who had been evacuated from Leningrad in 1941. In March 1942 she had completed a tractor-driver course with the Stapanovskii Machine Tractor Station (MTS). Smirnova was praised for the fact that having become a tractor driver she had risen to become brigadier of a tractor detachment (*otriada*): '*V 1942 godu brigada tov. SMIRNOVOI byla luchshei brigadoi MTS i v 1943 godu brigade ... vypolnila vesennogo seva i podema parov*.' Not only was Smirnova hailed as '*luchshii traktorist i brigadier traktornogo otriada*', she was also praised as an exemplary home-front contributor: '*nezabyvala o prakticheskoi pomoshu frontu i iz svoikh skromnykh sberezhenii vnesla 1,000 rublei na postroiku tankovoi kolonny zhen frontovikov*' [9].

Women such as Smirnova were extolled by party authorities as exemplars for the wives of frontline soldiers '*nerabotaiushchikh na proizvodstve*'. The objective was to encourage many more wives and mothers to join the workforce. Not only would they '*otdat' svoi dolg pered Rodnoi*', they would allegedly be rewarded by better living conditions. The promise of better food was clearly the objective of a meeting of 1200 '*zhen frontovikov i zhenshchin nerabotaiushchikh na proizvodstve*' called by the Yaroslavl' Gorkom on 10 August 1943. Eight of the '*luchshikh zhenshchin - zhen frontovikov, zamenivshikh svoikh muzh u stankov predpriatii*' addressed an audience said to have

listened 's *iskliuchitel'nym vnimaniem*'. 'Stakhanovka' Mar'sheva described how she had gone to work in the very same factory as her husband, although she had three young children. And she explained the rewards:

*V pervyi mesiats zarabotala 140 rublei, – vtoroi 300 pub. a teper' osvoila proizvodstvo i normu perevypolniaet ot 250 do 400%, zarabatyvaia 1000 i bol'she rublei v mesiats. Deti syty, odety. Rabota ne pomeshala ogorodom. Posadila kartofelia 600 kgm. i 100 kochnei kapusti. Tov. Mar'sheva prizvala zhenshchin svoim trudom na proizvodstve pomoch' Krasnoi Armii skorei razgromit' fashistskikh gadov.*

Mar'sheva's call was answered, according to the Gorkom report. 238 women went to work in industry while 'neskol'ko sot' others went to gather the *kolkhoz* harvest [10].

**Conclusion.** Wartime Soviet propaganda hailed Red Army soldiers on the frontline as heroes. Stalin's state boasted that it was caring for the families the soldiers had left behind. However, in reality, the Soviet state and society did not have the capacity to care for the vast number of military families needing assistance, especially in desperate military circumstances. The Yaroslavl' archives provide only a glimpse of a silent, 'second' front, where the wives and children of Red Army soldiers and officers struggled to survive.

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### Тыл в годы Великой Отечественной войны (1941–1945 гг.): борьба за выживание жен и семей красноармейцев в Ярославле

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**Аннотация.** Героический образ красноармейца отправившегося по зову Родины, чтобы защитить ее в годы Великой Отечественной войны против фашизма замаскировал суровую реальность жизни для жен и детей, которых солдаты оставили в тылу. Военной пропаганды утверждала, что о солдатских семьях хорошо заботятся. Но документы из архивов города Ярославля показывают, что жены и семьи простых солдат и офицеров боролись за свое выживание в тылу, особенно если они должны были заботиться о маленьких детей.

**Ключевые слова:** Великая Отечественная война; тыл; выживание; женщины; дети.