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## Women and 1812

The *Grande Armée* that invaded Russia in 1812 was not a homosocial, male-only organisation. It was composed not only of thousands of men drawn from across Europe, but was also accompanied by hundreds, if not thousands, of women. Throughout the early modern period women had been involved in military campaigns in a variety of capacities and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were no exception. At the top of the social and military hierarchy, officers sometimes took their wives with them on campaign. More common, however, were lower status women who often acted as sutlers, selling food, drink and other necessities to the soldiers. Many sutlers were also the wives of soldiers and non-commissioned officers. Regulations concerning the number of women that could accompany a given regiment on campaign varied by state and army. Within the French army, for example, the *cantinère* had an official place. They were limited to two per cavalry squadron and four per infantry battalion. The Prussian army, by contrast, tried to exclude women as part of its military reform programme after the crushing defeats at Jena and Auerstedt.

Some women seem to have provided other useful services. Heinrich von Roos commented on two 'ladies' who set themselves apart from the common soldiers' wives, Madam Wörth by her manners and Madame Weiler by her ability to speak Polish, which proved useful in securing supplies and local knowledge (Roos, p. 35) A handful of women participated as combatants, disguising themselves as men to fight, their sex sometimes only discovered after they were wounded or killed. The most famous example during the Russian campaign was the Nhadzda Durova, who fought against Napoleon's forces

Their exact number is unknown and they have left little documentary evidence in the archives. Faber du Faur's images occasionally represent the women of the *Grande Armée*, particularly during the retreat from Moscow. They appear but fleetingly in the memoirs of veterans. Despite the paucity of representation some women nevertheless, some seem to have played a crucial role in the survival of the soldiers. Joseph Schrafel, for example, claimed that he owed his survival as a prisoner of war to the actions of his wife, Walpurgis. Schrafel fell ill soon after capture. Confined in a hut with other sick and wounded prisoners his prospects were bleak, but he survived because his wife, who was captured alongside him, was able to find sufficient food and medicine. She nursed him through his fever, but fell victim to the sickness herself sometime later.

Although at least one veteran compared the Russian invasion and retreat to the war in Spain, there is one striking difference between the memoirs of both campaigns. This is the absence of the representation of sexual violence. French memoirs of the Peninsular often relate stories of rape and sexual assault committed by both the invaders and the guerrilla bands. There is little representation of this type of violence in German memoirs of Russia, however. Instead, where memoirists represent women it often highlights the kindly treatment they received at the hands of the Cossacks and Russian military. Several memoirists write of the generosity Cossacks showed pregnant women they captured. As Schrafel's story suggests female captives seem to have been afforded a greater degree of freedom than their husbands. Yet these representations often serve to highlight and emphasis the cruelty meted out to male prisoners of war.

The interaction between German soldiers of the *Grande Armée* is also fleetingly referred to in the autobiographical documents. Larry Wolff has suggested that Eastern Europe was represented as a sexualised space, where civilised sexual mores were absent. This seems substantiated by the memoirs of German veterans. The interaction with the population in Russia was less prolonged than that with the Spanish, but several memoirists nevertheless comment on the traits and characteristics of the local women. Some point to the attractiveness of Polish and Russian women, but, particularly in the case of the former also criticise their supposed sexual promiscuity (Conrady, p. 222). Others, suggest that their's was a surface beauty, claiming that the women were attractive only from a distance (Wedel, p. 175).

The lock of hair kept by Adam Freiherr von Harold, now held in the Bavarian War Archive, suggests that others were more enamoured with the local women. The lock is also indicative of the fact that there was another side to interpersonal relations during wartime. Romantic and consensual sexual relationships were possible between the invaders and the Russians. If a prisoner of war survived his initial capture and transportation into the interior, it was possible for him to win a degree of freedom, particularly if he was an officer and spoke French. The latter allowed him to communicate with the local nobility. Several German officers taken prisoner write of the dinners, balls and hunts they were invited to by the nobility while held prisoner in the Russian interior. Here there was ample opportunity to meet and interact with local women in a convivial and friendly atmosphere a world away from the horrors of the battlefield or the hardships of campaigning.

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