

Putin's Mobilization of Masculinity in the Invasion of Ukraine and the Role of Ukrainian Women in Stopping Him

Description

Her statue watching over Kyiv's Saint Michael's Square, Saint Olga has played an important role in inspiring the defenders who have protected Ukraine since Russia's invasion a year ago. In the 10th century, Olga avenged the killing of her husband Igor of Kyiv at the hands of the neighboring Devlian tribe, [brutally putting down](#) the Devlians' subsequent efforts to subjugate her Kyivan Rus kingdom. Today, Olga serves as Ukraine's patron saint of defiance and vengeance—two qualities in plentiful supply among the defenders repelling Russia's brutish invasion.

Throughout its invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has portrayed itself in wholly conventionally masculine ways—strong, powerful, entitled—while framing Ukraine as embodying traditionally feminized traits—weak, subservient, controlled. But Ukraine, channeling Olga's example, has integrated women into the defense of the homeland in a broadly effective manner, adding to warfighting capability at both the front and in supporting roles. This choice has had considerable impacts on the ground, where Ukraine has arguably entered the war's second year on top. Ukraine's example serves to demonstrate the importance of [rejecting](#) the hypermasculine chest-beating about the role of women in Western militaries that has become pervasive in some political quarters.

Pre-Invasion: Putin's Performative Hypermasculinity

In February 2022, just before the largest invasion since World War II, Russian President Vladimir Putin [told](#) French President Emmanuel Macron in reference to Ukraine: “Whether you like it or don't like it, bear with it, my beauty,” a reference to a Soviet-era punk-rock song about rape and necrophilia. (“Sleeping beauty in a coffin, I crept up and fucked her. Like it, or dislike it, sleep my beauty,” the song, by the group Red Mold, goes). In June 2022, then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson would [refer](#) to the war as “a crazy, macho war of invasion and violence,” with Putin representing a “perfect example of toxic masculinity.” Johnson was referring both to the careful [cultivation](#) of a macho, alpha male image by Putin, with his aggressive rhetoric accompanied by carefully stage-managed photos hunting, horse-riding, and fishing—usually shirtless—and to Putin's framing of the war itself.

Sociologists and political scientists [often note](#) that performative masculinity is usually associated with deep social injury: a sense of shame and humiliation and accompanying anger. Those demonstrating hypermasculine posturing are often compensating for hidden injuries and trying to recover a sense of dignity. In this context, individuals who perceive themselves to be a victim often [become the aggressor](#), and have, time and again, proven themselves capable of brutal violence against those who they consider have humiliated them.

When Putin performs his hypermasculinity on the world stage, he has both international and domestic audiences in mind. Well aware of Russia's reduced role in global politics, Putin has [long harbored](#) a deep resentment at the breakup of the Soviet Union after the fall of Communism, and [seeks](#) to reclaim the long-lost Russian Empire as he sees it. Putin views the post-Soviet era as one of national emasculation and national shame and is prepared to inflict immense violence to turn this around.

Domestically, this ties into Putin's [attempts](#) to reclaim a lost Soviet-era masculinity characterized by a powerful military, scientific breakthroughs including space exploration, and sporting success. [Scholars](#) such as Sarah Ashwin and Tatyana Lytkina have long argued that Russian men are "in crisis" and "domestically marginalized," particularly at the lower end of the economic spectrum. Not counting the urban elite, who have fled the cities in an attempt to avoid conscription, these Russians are unable to meet the expectations of traditional Soviet conceptions of men as providers and heads of the family. It is no coincidence that the suicide rate for Russian men, from which Putin draws his conscripts, is the world's highest, with unemployment, low socio-economic status, untreated mental illness, and substance abuse among the [key contributing factors](#). In response, Putin has sought to "rehabilitate Russian masculinity" with laws criminalizing homosexuality and legalizing forms of [domestic abuse](#). He has sought, with the Russian Orthodox Church, to contribute to the reinvigoration of a virile and traditional heterosexual masculinity targeting "weak" men. Both Putin and the Church seek to foster a return to traditional values where men embrace their former role as bread winner, with women prioritizing motherhood. Putin is, in effect, mobilizing both religion and masculinity in the service of a reinvigorated sense of Russian national identity.

The primary legitimation for the war [offered by Putin](#) is the protection of the rights of Russians and Russian-speaking people. But as the political scientist Elizaveta Gaufman [argues](#), Russia has also portrayed Ukraine as a "damsel in distress," a female and inferior geopolitical actor in need of Russian manhood and salvation from the corruption of the West. She notes further that he has framed the Ukrainian government as a neo-Nazi regime, painting the conflict as a battle between good and evil, but additionally as a battle between the masculine ideal represented by Putin and the deviant "sissy boys" represented by Ukrainian male politicians. Despite the clashing expansionist ambitions, herein lies his attractiveness to the Western far-right: as Jacob Heilbrunn [notes](#), the far-right

â??see Putin as a defender of traditional Christian values and an opponent of LGBTQ, an opponent of transgender and an opponent of the weakening of masculine virtues that were responsible for the rise of the West.â?• To cite just one example of their rapprochement, Donald Trump Jr. recently [called](#) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky an â??ungrateful international welfare queen.â?•

The Russian Orthodox Church has dutifully supported the Invasion of the Ukraine on moral grounds. Speaking just a month after the invasion, Patriarch Kirill [delivered](#) a sermon stating that the West had for years been engaging in â??the suppression and extermination of people in the Donbasâ?• because they rejected homosexuality. Former President Dmitry Medvedev has [stated](#) â??the goal is to stop the supreme ruler of Hell, whatever name he usesâ??Satan, Lucifer or Iblis.â?• In this context, the Ukraine conflict is represented as a battle not only against Western military imposition, but against Western immorality and to [expand the reach](#) of the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian men are consequently positioned not only as warriors fighting for their nation, but for their faith, a call taken up by some Muslim leaders in Russia similarly seeking [Putinâ??s approval](#).

Yet those at the fore of efforts to cast the Russian military as a hypermasculine elite fighting force have proven largely unsuccessful in combat. Russian paratroopers of the 331st Parachute Regiment wearing the blue and white *telnyashka* singlet were a staple of Red Square Parades in Moscow and often photographed as muscular men engaged in hand-to-hand combat practice. They were [described](#) by Russian leadership as the â??best of the best.â?• Yet [up to half](#) of the regimentâ??s forces that entered Ukraine have been killed or wounded since joining the battle at Hostomel Airport in the first days of the invasion, in what has been described as the event that [ended the myth of the invincibility](#) of Russian airborne troops.

The Role of Ukrainian Women

In the face of Russian aggression, Zelensky stands in [powerful contrast](#) to the cultivated hypermasculinity of Putin. The same president who was [widely criticized](#) for proclaiming Ukrainian women as part of Ukraineâ??s brand in 2019, would, a year into the invasion in March 2023, praise Ukrainian women as equals, presenting them with awards and [thanking them](#) for their sacrifice for their country. The former actor has assumed a new roleâ??as defiant, [courageous wartime leader](#). â??The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride,â?• he [reportedly](#) responded to an American offer of exfiltration.

[The role of women](#) has been an important, yet largely overlooked, story in the successful resistance to the Russian invasion. [Many](#), including the journalist Iryna Slavinska, [trace](#) this to Ukraineâ??s strong history of feminism. Ukrainian women struggled against the Soviet-era gulag system and now fight against invasion, perhaps more aware than most of the consequences of failure. Many of the weapons

flooding into Ukraine are now carried by women soldiers, who have mobilized in unprecedented numbers in support of the war effort. Ukrainian women in the armed forces [number](#) up to 60,000—around one-fifth of the total. —All Russians are scared of us,— one Ukrainian sniper, who some have nicknamed Joan of Arc, [said](#). —Afraid of me, afraid of us. Ukrainian women.— Local organizations have [dedicated](#) time and effort to tailoring uniforms for thousands of women, while they fight on the front line. First Lady Olena Zelenska, meanwhile, has [taken the lead](#) on the psychological front, working to ensure Ukrainians have tools at their disposal to successfully process their trauma.

Of course, even this seemingly successful case study has its [issues](#). Although Ukraine’s public relations campaign has sought to highlight its frontline female fighters, these soldiers are often placed in supporting roles, or worse, [seen as distractions](#), —substitutes for absent men, rather than valued contributors in their own right.— They often must scrounge for proper-fitting fatigues. Those who are captured are subjected to a range of terrors not necessarily faced by men—including rape. Additionally, as men have been mobilized, women have been left to deal with hardship on the home front. But there are also promising [suggestions](#) that attitudes are changing, and now, [according](#) to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, —the Ukrainian military is one of the most feminized armed forces in Europe.— The belief that the army is no place for women is a relic of the Soviet mentality,— Oksana Hryhoryeva, a gender adviser to the commander of the Ukrainian military’s land forces, [said](#). Ukraine, for its part, has clearly refused to accede to those preconceptions.

In [building morale](#) both at home and abroad, Ukraine has eagerly shared heroic stories of resolute civilian womanhood. Last February, [multiple Western English-language](#) news sites reported on Ukrainian mothers making Molotov cocktails in the early days of war—a story likely deliberately cultivated by Kyiv to convey to Russian soldiers that they would never manage to control Ukrainian pride behind the front lines. One Ukrainian grandmother from eastern Kyiv [told](#) CNN, —Let those Russian shits come here. We are ready to greet them.— In another viral story of brave women on the frontlines, one Ukrainian woman [badgered](#) Russian soldiers on video, telling them, —Take these seeds and put them in your pockets, so at least sunflowers will grow when you all lie down here.— Ukraine subsequently [adopted](#) its national flower, the sunflower, as an international symbol of solidarity. In Konotop, one Russian occupier was [told](#), —You do not know our city. Here every second woman is a witch. You won’t be able to get a hard-on tomorrow.— And on March 5 last year, Ukraine’s Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security [tweeted](#) a picture of a mother walking her young child across the road, a large rifle slung over her other arm. —Every Ukrainian mother deserves to be called a Wonder Woman,— the caption read. In the rare instances when Russian soldiers begrudgingly respect Ukrainian female fighters, they compare them to men. —You have balls of iron, more than most men,— a Ukrainian woman arrested for spying behind Russian lines was [told](#).

In response to continued Ukrainian resistance, many Russian soldiers have resorted, like powers of old facing guerilla and irregular warfare, to war crimes, seeking to [terrorize](#) the local population and their enemy with executions, castration, the rape of male and female captives, and other forms of sexual violence. The resistance of women to these atrocities through survival, sharing their stories, and fighting against the Russians has played a critical role in garnering international support. Indeed, branding mattersâ??as the academic Valerie Sperling recently [outlined](#), â??there is a certain element of engaging women so overtly that I think is supposed to be Europeanizing and Westernizing.â?•

Women in Battles to Come

Ukraine might now be a model for how to effectively integrate women into a military, how to integrate elements of feminist theory into security policy, and how to draw successfully upon the role of women in the context of sustained combat operations against a numerically superior force. For Ukraineâ??s part, they will need to continue to champion the advances made during this past year, during the rest of the war as well as in the years to come. In July 2022, Zelensky ratified the Istanbul Convention on violence against women, and though Ukraine has [not always been revered](#) for gender equality, important steps taken over the past year should be recognized. â??The Ukrainian women who, in and out of uniform, form a cornerstone of Ukraineâ??s resistance today will be at the center of the effort to rebuild tomorrow,â?• [writes](#) the analyst Olga Oliker. â??If Kyiv matches its rhetoric with action, its military can reflect its society, give back to its heroes, and serve as a shining model for the world.â?•

There is also an important lesson for Western policymakers, particularly in how best to prepare its militaries for major conflicts. In a May 2021 [tweet](#) contrasting Russian military ads depicting shirtless men doing pushups and soldiers jumping out of airplanes with an American Army advertisement celebrating a female soldierâ??s unconventional upbringing, Republican Senator Ted Cruz proclaimed, â??Holy crap. Perhaps a woke, emasculated military is not the best ideaâ?!.â?• But Cruzâ??s ideal, hypermasculine military has fallen spectacularly short in Ukraine, and it bears considering how the qualities prioritized by Ukraineâ??s armed forcesâ??cunning, speed, adaptabilityâ??combined with the effective mobilization of women might be cultivated by Western militaries as they prepare for new conflicts. Contrary to Cruzâ??s assumption, it appears that speed and flexibility on the one hand, and mental strength and courage on the other, are far more effective than performative hypermasculinity. As Ukraineâ??s defense ministry [tweeted](#) in October in reference to Greek mythology, â??Victoryâ??s name is female.â?•

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Photo: Independence Day parade in Ukraine. Credit: spoilt.exile

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