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# Women's Mobilization for War (Russian Empire)

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**The First World War contributed to sharp, wide-ranging changes in women's social, legal and familial status, which in turn impacted women's self-esteem and mental attitudes. Women entered the war in one state and emerged with new behavioral practices and attitudes toward life. Military life reshaped family foundations, revealed public initiative in women's organizations and led to manifestations of women's emancipation. Women were unavoidably active on the "home front," as prejudices and stereotypes about a woman's role in society were destroyed. The war allowed women to exhibit independence unthinkable only a few years earlier. Overcoming deprivation, disaster, humiliation and other wartime challenges, women displayed a surprising capacity not only to survive, but to thrive in previously male-dominated roles.**

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## Women in the Army

The onset of combat led to the creation of a female volunteer movement fueled by some women's desire to serve in the army and defend the Fatherland. This movement received limited public support. In Petrograd, the campaign to allow women in the army was conducted in the [newspapers](#). The small circle of female activists called for women in reconnaissance, telephone and [telegraph service](#) in the field and as clerks, orderlies, messengers and bicyclists. However, the high command and the authorities did not support the initiative. The [Tsarist government](#) did not have a consistent policy with respect to women who wanted to join in combat. Female soldiers were seen as an anomaly and petitions from Russian women requesting to fight were rejected. In contrast, women were allowed to serve in the American and British armed forces as auxiliary personnel, although they were categorically forbidden from being quartered near the front or being assigned to combat missions.

It is impossible to identify the first female combatant, since women who went to the front as a rule concealed their gender, dressing in men's clothing or passing themselves off as adolescents. Field identification occurred only after a serious wound or death and no special statistics were kept on women's presence in the army, but estimates suggest that there were more than 5,000. Many of the disguised female soldiers were poorly educated and occupied a low social position; however, educated female professionals and students also volunteered. A considerable social and intellectual gulf existed between the two groups.

Volunteers did not always manage to become soldiers, although approval from a commander or a request from other soldiers was usually sufficient to ensure entry into the ranks. Many of the women who became soldiers received combat awards and became noncommissioned officers, such as Anna Alekseevna Krasil'nikova a twenty-year-old miner's daughter who dressed in men's clothes, participated in nineteen battles and was awarded the George Cross, 4<sup>th</sup> degree. At least nine others were also awarded the George Cross: [Mariia Bochkareva \(1889-1920\)](#), [Elizaveta Alexandrovna Girenkova](#), [Rimma Mikhailovna Ivanova \(1894-1915\)](#), [Natalia Komarova](#), [Antonina Tyhonovna Pal'shina \(1897-1992\)](#), [Antonia Potemkina](#), [Z. Smirnova](#), [Ye. Khechinova](#) and [Olga Shidlovskaja](#). The majority received these awards as men; only later did the military command find out that the battle heroes were women.

The appearance of women in military uniform was received as a sensation, provoking lively comments, doubts and expectations. The periodical press actively propagandized the female defender of "the Faith, the Tsar and the Fatherland," but the Russian army's military regulations and traditions prevented women from legally joining. For example, Mariia Bochkareva only managed to become a soldier after receiving a telegram from [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#) with imperial benevolence.

Motives for entering army ranks in the guise of volunteer youth varied. The most typical were:

1) Infatuation with frontline romanticism; 2) Proximity to fiancés or husbands; 3) Determination to

avenge the death of a beloved; 4) Patriotism and a desire to defend the Fatherland; 5) Prior involvement in the military fraternity (e.g. female [Cossacks](#)), experience as a rider or possession of weapons;<sup>[1]</sup> 6) Desire for adventure and thrill, including prostitution.

The appearance of women in a male military community provoked an unambiguous reaction and a desire for close contact with the "strangers." Most men viewed the female volunteers as objects for sexual harassment, rejecting assumptions about their patriotic ardor and military worth. There was widespread misogyny in the Russian army, as in other warring countries' armies. [Rape](#), both in occupied countries and behind the lines, was often noted in memoirs. Whether the woman was a [refugee](#), soldier's wife, soldier, or city-dweller did not matter to soldiers involved in rape. Sexual aggression increased significantly during the war and brought much trouble to the military command, which strived to maintain discipline among the troops.

Female soldiers not only had to show that they could fight as well as men, but they also had to demonstrate frontline experience and "male behavior." The majority of female volunteers did not set out to fight for female equality; they simply realized this equality in practice on the battlefield.

Some of the women proved masters of male military specialties. In 1915, the automotive service of the [Union of Zemstvos](#) opened driving courses for women. Fifty-eight women successfully completed these courses. One was former Bestuzhev student [Elena P. Samsonova \(1890-1958\)](#), who became the first Russian female pilot in 1912. At first her application to become a military pilot was rejected, so she decided to become a nurse and driver. Another pilot, Princess [Evgenia M. Shakhovskaia \(1889-1920\)](#), was luckier and assumed her responsibilities immediately upon passing the aviation examination.

But women in the Russian army were still an absolute minority, and their main efforts were concentrated on the home front, collecting donations, working in [hospitals](#) and helping refugees and the families of those conscripted. By 1917 some women were persistently advocating the formation of female military units. This initiative, whose main motive was to prevent a collapse of the front and avert mass desertion, understandably received the [Provisional Government's](#) and Russian army command's support.

In May 1917, a women's battalion appeared, thanks to Mariia Bochkareva, a frontline soldier and companion of the Order of St. George. Arriving in the capital, she met with [Mishail Vladimirovich Rodzianko \(1859-1924\)](#) and described her idea of maintaining soldiers' morale by creating a "Women's Battalion of Death" under her command. She soon received the support of Generals [Aleksei Alekseevich Brusilov \(1853-1926\)](#) and [Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerenskii \(1881-1970\)](#).

In the summer of 1917, female military subunits began to arise in various cities, including Kiev, Minsk, Poltava, Irkutsk, Mariupol', Odessa, Ekaterinodar, Khar'kov, Baku, Simbirsk, Orenburg, Viatka, Saratov and Khabarovsk. A Black Sea military union of women was created in southern Russia. A women's military patriotic union headed by E. I. Molleson also worked vigorously to form female battalions. An All-Russian Women's Military Congress was held in Petrograd from 1 to 5

August 1917. Representatives from women's military organizations and units from Moscow, Kiev, Saratov and other cities took part.

However, by August 1917, the military command and Provisional Government's attitude toward female units had changed drastically. Desertion and insubordination had increased, and female soldiers' example could no longer stop the collapse of Russia's armed forces. Frontline soldiers who were tired of the war took an intransigent position toward female soldiers. Having arrived at the front, the "Women's Battalion of Death" had to guard against attacks not only from the enemy but also from their own soldiers, who tried to storm female barracks at night. Their first "battle" was defending their own honor.

On 23 August 1917, the Provisional Government issued a decree stating that female subunits could only be used to defend [railroads](#), rail junctions and stations. In October 1917, the formation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Petrograd Women's Battalion at Levashovo Station was completed. On 25 October 1917, the battalion's second company of 137 personnel was sent to the Winter Palace to defend the Provisional Government instead of being sent to the Romanian front, as planned. True to their oath and military duty there were women who wanted to fight enemies at the front and did not wish to be drawn into political confrontation in the capital. At the order of their commanders, these female volunteers put down weapons, were disarmed and arrested. After several weeks, the battalion was disbanded. Other battalions continued to exist for some time, but on 30 November 1917 the Military Council ordered all women's military units disbanded. Some of the female volunteers fled to the Don, served in the White Army as nurses or fought the Reds. Others, like Antonina Pal'shina, actively cooperated with the [Red Army](#) and supported the Bolsheviks' government.

## Nurses in the War

Many women served at the front as [nurses](#) and medical orderlies. They came from all strata of Russian society: students, doctors, journalists, writers, peasants, workers and teachers. Nursing societies also sent representatives. [Widows](#), hoping work would make it easier to bear their grief and enable them to provide for themselves, eagerly went into nursing. [Nurses](#) received a travel allowance between fifty and 100 rubles. They were paid a very respectable salary of sixty to seventy-five rubles per month and given free housing and a food allowance. Three-month [Red Cross](#) nursing courses were opened everywhere. In addition, organs of the rural self-government (Zemstvos) and doctors' societies opened six-week courses with an abbreviated program.

For some Russian women, primarily those from wealthy and noble families, a nurse's salary did not present a material incentive. These women thought that their activity was patriotic and a symbol of their personal sacrifice and selflessness. In Petersburg and other cities, many young women from wealthy families signed up as caregivers for wounded soldiers in infirmaries. Several famous singers and other representatives of the creative intelligentsia became nurses. The profession was also popular at court, where members of the imperial family tried to inspire other women with their personal example. [Alexandra Feodorovna, Empress consort of Russia \(1872-1918\)](#) and her

daughters [Ol'ga Nikolaevna, Grand Duchess of Russia \(1895-1918\)](#), [Tat'iana Nikolaevna, Grand Duchess of Russia \(1897-1918\)](#), [Maria Nikolaevna, Grand Duchess of Russia \(1899-1918\)](#) and [Anastasiia Nikolaevna, Grand Duchess of Russia \(1901-1918\)](#) headed committees to give temporary aid to victims and were trustees of military hospitals and infirmaries. Wives, daughters and relatives of high-ranking individuals also worked at military hospitals and infirmaries, including a State Council member's wife, S. Denisova, a Naval Minister's daughter, K. Bubnova, the Council of Ministers Chairman's daughter, I. Goremykin, Alexandra Okhochinskaia, Princesses M. A. Gagarina, M. N. Engalycheva, A. I. Zvenigorodskaia, V. A. Kropotkina, A. A. Urusova and M. B. Shcherbatova, Countesses M. A. Golenishcheva-Kutuzova, V. P. Konovnitsyna, and others.

Women who were primarily attracted by revolutionary ideas also enlisted. [Vladimir Lenin's \(1870-1924\)](#) sister, [Mariia Ul'ianova \(1878-1937\)](#), an active member of the Bolshevik Party figure, tired of police persecution and became a nurse in order to remove suspicion. A total of 2,255 Russian [Red Cross](#) Society institutions operated at the fronts, including 149 hospitals with 46,000 beds served by 2,450 doctors and 20,000 nurses. There were 736 local committees, 112 nursing societies and eighty hospitals behind the frontlines.

The patriotic nurse image was especially common in official [propaganda](#) at the beginning of the war. Special brochures, pulp fiction and posters were printed and praised the feats and selflessness of Russian women who had donned a nurse's uniform. The nurses themselves had an unambiguous attitude toward such stereotypical assessments of their activity. Russian feminists also objected to such a primitive characterization of the exhibition of femininity and the new application of female labor. Gradually, the perception of nurses changed under the influence of everyday military life. For frontline soldiers, nurses became a symbol of depravity and "home front swinishness." The terms "nurses of consolation" and "nurses without mercy" appeared and staff cars were named "nurse transports." The nurse became the central figure of frontline soldiers' sexual fantasies and hatred.

Russian nurses sometimes violated their obligations not to participate in battle. For example, after an officer's death, the frontline nurse Rimma Mikhailovna Ivanova took command of the remaining soldiers and led them in an attack on enemy trenches. She was mortally wounded and posthumously awarded the George Cross, 4<sup>th</sup> degree. All the newspapers wrote about the nurse heroine. However, she had violated the international code on nurse responsibilities, which stated that nurses did not have the right to take up arms or participate in battles. Nonetheless, many nurses were awarded George Medals and Crosses for bravery, including E. K. Saltykova, M. F. Kokh, senior nurses Matveieva and Iuzefovich, nurses Lebedeva, Raich-Dumitrashko, Lishina, Kusova and [Elizaveta Alekseevna Abaza \(1892-1941\)](#).

The events of [February and March 1917](#) led to an explosion of revolutionary bands: soldiers began to be rude to doctors and nurses, discipline declined sharply and the rhythm of operation of medical institutions was disrupted. Some nurses were forced to leave the hospitals and search for other sources of livelihood. In the first months after the overthrow of Russian autocracy, an intensive formation of public organizations and alliances of various professional groups and social strata

occurred. Nurses often spoke at rallies and meetings and also appeared in newspapers describing their political positions and attitude toward the Provisional Government and the war. The participation of female medical workers, which had become widespread, led not only to their numerical increase, but also to organized events in the nursing movement. Nurses who had passed through the crucible of WWI were also broadly represented in the [Civil War](#).

## Public Women's Organizations

The First World War provided an opportunity for civic activity and led to a growth of public women's organizations. The majority of preexisting women's societies in the warring declared that their work was subordinate to war-related needs. In [Russia](#), the organizations created nursing courses, collected donations, opened refugee shelters, kindergartens for soldiers' children and public dining halls and gave aid to servicemen's wives.

One of the Russian feminist leaders, [Anna Nikolaevna Shabanova \(1848-1932\)](#), noted in January 1915:

Hardly had the thundering of cannons in the distance rung out, hardly had the first women's tears during the first sendoffs of husbands and sons to distant battles dried than Russian women mobilized their forces to serve the motherland, not from an mandatory summons but of their own accord and sense of duty<sup>[2]</sup>

The activity of women on the home front was often compared to "mobilizations"<sup>[3]</sup>. The wives of governors, nobility marshals, military commanders, prominent officials and merchants were responsible for creating ladies' committees and other public ladies' organizations. Female workers and peasants joined some ladies' committees. In addition, female teachers and priests' wives were enlisted to survey the neediness of the families of lower ranked conscripts. Thus, the war promoted the democratization of ladies' committees.

However, women did not limit their activity to ladies' committees and organizations. The war made it possible for Russian women, though hardly the first in a European context, to gain representation in the most varied of public organizations: boards of trustees, refugee organizational committees, etc. For example, in 1915, the Russian League for Equal Rights for Women decided to help female [refugees](#). Thinking that "charity as such always humiliates the human personality,"<sup>[4]</sup> the League's board decided to organize labor aid for the refugees on a cooperative basis. The appearance of women at district meetings and their election to district boards of guardians that helped conscripted soldiers' families was an unprecedented phenomenon in Russian provinces. The war changed rural women's social status, granting them equal rights on district boards of guardians. The "petticoat meetings" became a customary phenomenon. But in many regions, the women who replaced conscripted men successfully performed the administrative responsibilities of the elders, police and other rural administration officials. Such feminization of rural meetings also had political consequences, allowing women to actively participate in local government. In addition, women took



an active part in cooperatives and consumer shops, verified the neediness of draftees' families and bore other public burdens during the war.

## **Women's Everyday Life**

Contrary to official patriotic propaganda, manifestations of majestic nationalistic initiatives and bellicose rhetoric, Russian women were not united in their thoughts and actions. Whereas female intellectuals and many Russian feminists yielded to the initial patriotic euphoria, most female peasants viewed the war as a tragedy accompanied by suffering, deprivation and threats to family and everyday life. Whereas the typical Western European woman was completely in agreement with the government's activity to mobilize resources for military needs, the majority of Russian women clearly demonstrated their antiwar mood.

The mass mobilization of men led to serious strains demographically, socially and psychologically. For peasant women, the idea of a patriotic upsurge was a myth. Most women perceived the war as an inevitable, uncontrollable natural calamity, a test handed down by God. These women began to search for an escape, haunting the doorsteps of Zemstvos and government institutions in search of assistance. They also searched for additional sources of sustenance, trying to solve problems formerly taken care of by men. A job with a steady income was the most effective solution. Many soldiers' wives did not turn down any additional work in order to support their families.

## **Women's Work**

The biggest changes in women's status were in the work sphere. Women unexpectedly received access to previously forbidden "men's" jobs. Although characteristic of most warring countries, labor feminization was most widely expressed in Russia. Before the war, it was hard to imagine a woman working as a shop assistant, conductor, construction worker, doorkeeper, etc. Women eagerly accepted any work and soon there were female carriage drivers, lumberjacks, water carriers, street sweepers, messengers, beauticians, asphalt spreaders, bookkeepers, secretaries, telegraph operators and firefighters.

Allowing such access to new professions was an inevitable step for the authorities and employers, given the numerous vacancies in the labor market. Ministries and agencies were forced to change the statutes on female labor. For example, the Ministry of Railways permitted railway chiefs to hire women for office positions or as conductors, stokers and steam locomotive cleaners. By 1916, female labor was increasingly common in Russian industrial enterprises. Hundreds of thousands of Russian women were removed from economic nonexistence and filled men's positions. The loss of male labor in villages also led to a rapid feminization of agricultural work. Women now plowed, sowed, mowed and harvested. Some soldiers' wives openly stated that their lives improved after their husbands left. Constant beatings, humiliation, drunken debauches and scandals stopped. For the first time, women could run the household independently.

Economic independence unavoidably changed women's outlook. It was no coincidence that significant changes in women's fashion also occurred during the war. Corsets and fancy dresses were abandoned in favor of wide, comfortable skirts and simple blouses gathered in front with a wide belt. Short haircuts began to squeeze bouffants. Strict lines in dark tones became established. Many soldiers' wives were able to buy themselves elegant clothing and shoes, refreshing their wardrobe for the first time. Of course, the majority of women devoted most of the soldier's pay to the family budget or put it in a bank, but some Russian women also kept money for personal needs.

## Women's Conjugal Behavior

The war also had a big impact on family and marital relations. The number of young unmarried women and widows grew. Many women were not able to marry and build their own family as a result of the millions of wartime deaths. An increase in casual relationships, [prostitution](#), illegitimate births and venereal diseases was an unavoidable concomitant of the war.

[Prisoners of war](#) were one of the problems. Initially, some POWs were placed in peasant homes to help "orphaned" families. Sometimes relationships developed between the prisoners and soldiers' wives. Instances of prisoners sexually soliciting Russian women were also noted. At the same time, some Austrian prisoners (most often Serbs) filed requests with the Russian army command to marry a soldier's widow. At times, widows did not object to creating a new family, but military authorities prohibited these marriages, citing wartime conditions. Rumors regularly reached the front that prisoners were living with soldiers' families.

Judging from the reports of military [censorship](#) teams between 1915 and 1917, the problem of wives maintaining marital fidelity greatly disturbed soldiers at the front. The soldiers' indignation at the village "debauchery," in which they imagined their wives engaging in sexual relations with POWs, was the second most common topic of their [letters](#), after high prices. Soldiers demanded that local clergy "make their own sermons and appeal to the wives' consciences,"<sup>[5]</sup> viewing their own wives as enemy accomplices. Soon, POWs were withdrawn from peasant homes, which relieved the tension among frontline soldiers.

Another significant trend in correspondence between soldiers' wives and their husbands was observed. In 1914 and 1915, wives did not write about their difficult economic situation. But as time went on, war fatigue and difficult everyday conditions led women to inform their husbands about their loneliness, fatigue and despair. Such letters likely fueled demoralization, desertion and as a result, the Tsarist regime's collapse.

## Women's Moods

The impact of World War I was deeply reflected in Russian women's spiritual and psychological sphere. The war caused grief, depression, worry, alarm and torrents of tears shed by wives, mothers and sisters left behind. Women's difficult emotional experiences were connected with the



unavoidable effects of war: increased cost of living, difficult living conditions and a complete uncertainty about the future. In Moscow alone, the number of mentally ill women in hospitals rose by 25 percent at the beginning of the war. Reactive psychoses became a common phenomenon and an increase in women with schizophrenia was also noted. In a number of cases, nervous breakdowns and illnesses were fatal and the number of suicides rose sharply.

The war promoted the wide-scale spread of rumors and superstitions. Women often turned to soothsayers and fortune-tellers, hoping they would give them happy news and help "track down" their beloved. Rumors about domestic disturbances, the Germans' extraordinary victories, the appearance of robber bands and more, circulated in cities and villages. The female population often had a poor understanding of the warring sides and the war itself remained incomprehensible and foreign.

Military operations initially provoked an intensification of women's religious feelings. This was exhibited in zealous visits to services and doubled sales of communion bread for loved ones' health. Eagerness for requested rites with acathistes [hymns] and services for those at war, as well as funeral services for those who had died at the front rose. Sometimes women also ordered "living forty-day prayers for the dead," forty divine liturgies. An unprecedented number of worshippers appeared in churches. Lamps burning in front of icons were visible in village hut windows. Many Russian women did not sleep at night, instead shedding tear in front of icons.

This increase in religious sentiments among Russian women is easily explained. Early on the church and faith in God conveyed hope and lifted mental and emotion stress; this exerted a beneficial influence on mental balance, since the war necessitated some sort of release. But war fatigue, the authorities' lethargy and bad news from the front in 1915 promoted a decline in religious sentiments and a desacralization of spiritual and secular authority. Russian women's religious worldview saw cracks; women realized that they needed to rely on their own efforts rather than on divine forces.

## Women's Rebelliousness

During the war, spontaneous speeches by Russian women were radical and uncompromising. "Petticoat rebellions" were caused not only by an aggravated feeling of injustice and war fatigue, but by resentment against the authorities' lethargy in supporting families of those conscripted.

"Petticoat rebellions" occurred most frequently in peasant environments. In the Central Black Earth Zone, for example, soldiers' wives' unrest was associated with a reluctance to continue apportioning farmsteads and cut-off sections of land from the community. Community members categorically refused to survey land before the return of the mobilized owners, hoping that after the war's end the land would remain in the community and that the landowners' lands would be transferred to peasant hands.

In the cities, soldiers' wives often raided bread shops, dissatisfied with the lines and merchants'

concealment of goods. There were 654 food riots in 1915 alone. But food-related disturbances began with earnest in 1916. They involved the Astrakhan', Tavrisheskaia, Tambov, Tomsk, Voronezh, Samara, Nizhnii Novgorod, Orenburg, Kuban', Stavropol', Khar'kov, Chernigov, Podol'sk and Kiev provinces, almost all of the Volga and Urals and some regions of Siberia.

In the fall of 1916, constant rebellious food-related outbreaks involving female workers, soldiers' wives, adolescents and some male workers were observed in the capital. Lootings of food stores became an everyday phenomenon in Petrograd. Such a "petticoat rebellion", which did not become widespread in Europe, reflected mistrust of the authorities, the inability to ensure a certain standard of living, growth of civic consciousness and a struggle for rights.

The war played an important role in Russian women's future. Despite being a tragedy in women's personal lives, the war eliminated obstacles that stood in women's way in peacetime. In fact, war and the changes in women's social and legal status promoted real equality in professional and social status.

The most important result of women's military experience was not only the independence and initiative of Russian women but also the changes in how society perceived women. World War I was the litmus paper that displayed the multifaceted possibilities and needs of Russian women in this crisis period of Russian history. The war significantly changed ideas about gender roles and traditional femininity, and opened up new possibilities both for women as a whole as well as for their organizations.

"Women's consciousness," "female dominance," and "female initiative" have been completely folded into the context of the crises and shocks of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Revolutionary cataclysms of the Civil War cultivated the military experience of some women in "women's councils," "female commissars," and the feminization of a number of fields, but at the same time sharply discarded this female self-realization, military experience and self-consciousness under the radical class approach and intolerant Communist ideology.

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## Notes

1. ↑ Examples include the sportswoman Kudasheva, who arrived at the front line on her own horse, Kuban Cossack Elena Choba, who was not only a dashing rider but also handled silent weapons very well (Nikol'skii A.: Zhenshchiny i deti na voine [Women and children at war], in: Russkaia mysl' 2 (1916), p. 78), and the sportswoman Mariia Isaakova, who ordered a well-trained Cossack horse from Novocherkassk and bought a military uniform and weapons (Zhenshchina-voin. Kiev 1914, p. 21). All were enlisted in mounted reconnaissance.
2. ↑ "Edva razdalis' vdali raskatistye gromy pushek, edva oshushchilis' pervye zhenskie slezy pri pervykh provodakh muzhei i synovei na dal'nie boi, kak russkie zhenshchiny, ne po ob'iazatel'nomu prizyvu, no po sobstvennomu pobuzhdeniiu i soznaniiu dolga mobilizovali svoi sily dlia sluzheniia rodine." Zhenskii vestnik 2 (1915), p. 50.
3. ↑ Mir zhenshchiny 3 (1915), p. 1.
4. ↑ "...blagotvoritel'nost', kak takovaia, vseгда unizhaet chelovecheskuiu lichnost'". Otchet Rossiiskoi ligi ravnopravii zhenshchin za 1914 i 1915 gg. [The Report of the Russian League for Women's Equality for 1914-1915], Petrograd 1917, p. 14.
5. ↑ "... vystupit' so svoei propoved'iu i usovestit' bab" [...to Sermonize and Exhort Old Women]. Astashov A. V.: Russkii krest'ianin na poliakh Pervoi mirovoi voiny [The Russian Peasant on the Fields of the First World War], in: Otechestvennaia istoriia 2 (2003), p. 83.

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