Russia's Double Historical Amnesia: Constructing the Shakhidki as 'Black Widows'

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The United States of America (USA) has been widely denounced for its volatile employment of irregular combatants (irregulars) and use of unbound security practices, including rendition and torture, against irregulars during the Global War on Terror. This essay takes the position that such a denunciation, though not unfounded, is one-dimensional given the pre-established international norms of either using irregulars for self-gain or countering them in a notably harsh manner. Consequently, it is argued that the Russian government's treatment of female irregulars during the Second Chechen War of secession (1999-2009) demonstrates the pendular interrelation between the castigation and employment of irregulars based entirely on State interest. By analysing the malestream rhetoric portraying female irregulars during the aforementioned conflict this essay unpacks the effects of constructing Chechen female irregulars (*Shakhidki*) as crazed and deluded 'Black Widows' as well as outlining their twofold irregularity. This paper expounds that such a construction, ultimately, led to the institutionalisation of extra-legal Russian policies (*bespredel* and *zachistki*) directed specifically against female irregulars, whilst highlighting the "double historical amnesia" of Russian policymakers who, during World War II (WWII), supported irregular and 'irregular regular' female units (Scheipers 2015: 202; Goldstein 2001: 65). Ultimately, it will be shown that States have implemented an à la carte approach to dealing with irregulars whereby extreme policies countering (female) irregulars, who were once a State asset, have become institutionalised and the female irregular combatant demonised to the extent that they have become bare life until their commission is deemed operationally beneficial to the State.

For the purposes of this essay, unknown knowns are: knowledge we do not want to know, knowledge that is ignored, forgotten, suppressed or repressed (Daase and Kessler 2007: 412-414). *Zachistki* is the Russian term denoting 'cleansing' operations where an area is surrounded and sealed off by armed forces to uncover Chechen irregulars: arbitrary torture, abuse and killings ensue; this practise has been principally directed at women in the Chechen case (Putney 2003; Conley 2010: 334; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 92-93). *Bespredel* translates, literally, as 'no limits' validating the notion that unbound action against Chechen irregulars has been institutionalised: extra-legal actions against the Shakhidki have no legal ramifications (Conley 2010: 334). Irregular fighters take on different, socially constructed, definitions; for this reason, this essay uses the *concept* of the irregular and analyses the perlocutionary effects of the irregular label as opposed invoking an unrealistic concrete definition (Scheipers 2015: 29). I advance that the Shakhidki were constructed as doubly irregular as they: a) engage in irregular warfare as part of non-traditional units; and b) transgress traditional notions of femininity, disrupting the non-violent, peace-loving gender stereotype; this partially derives from Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry's work (2007: 87-89). Double historical amnesia is extrapolated from Sibylle Scheipers' application to the USA to argue that Russia 'forgot' its historical use of women in regular units (ergo, unacknowledged 'irregular regulars') and female irregular partisan units in combat when advocating that the Shakhidki were illegitimate combatants based on a decisively gendered discourse (2015: 207; Goldstein 2001: 64). Sjoberg and Gentry explicate the mother narrative as: women motivated by rage resulting from maternal loss, inadequacy or incredulity, thus having no agency (2007: 33-35). Monsters (conforming to the demonising and pejorative effect of the broader irregular label) depicts women as pathologically damaged and drawn to violence; agency is removed because their womanhood and psychological integrity are compromised: they are femininity gone awry (Ibid: 37-40; Mégret 2006: 272; Scheipers 2015: 29).

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Malestream is the masculinely gendered mainstream (Youngs 2004: 1). The 'beautiful souls' narrative presents women as fragile, removed from reality and in need of protection (traditional assumption on femininity) (Elshtain 2001: 8). Gender is "an intersubjective social construction that evolves with changing societal perceptions" describing "socially constructed difference[s] between [men and women]" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 5). The honorary man is a new gender category where female *soldiers* have, by definition and status, become men: their femininity is eliminated; women are defined purely on competency, however, malestream notions of femininity outside this category persist (King, forthcoming). I expand on this category to argue that female *irregulars* used by Russia during WWII occupied, an 'auxiliary man' category: they were used by necessity alone, as replacements for men and 'new' norms were reverted following the re-establishment of order and the end of the wars.

Women as combat soldiers are historically sporadic yet Russian history comprises the largest mobilisation of women into combat facing roles in modern great-power armies: approximately 800,000 'invisible' women were drafted into the Red Army during WWII (200,000 irregulars and 500,000 as regular forces on the frontline) (Goldstein 2001: 64-65; Pennington 2000: 152). Between 1941 and 1943 women progressed from supporting roles, more closely linked to traditional notions of femininity (mothers and beautiful souls), to frontline combat roles, traditionally associated with masculinity: this appears indicative of a positive 'transformation' (used loosely) of gender norms as it saw the quasi-institutionalisation of antiaircraft gunning as a female dominated specialty and multiple all-female air force units were founded (Goldstein 2001: 65; Pennington 2000). By extension, this is an unknown known whereby women's traditional roles, embodying mothering and subordinate characteristics, were apparently ignored during an emergency: most, if not all, rhetoric at the time discussed female irregulars in heroic (often hyperbolic) terms, glorifying their actions to the point there exists no true mother or monster presentation; their irregularity as females in a combat role was overlooked (King, forthcoming; Goldstein 2001: 76). Ergo, it is here that I invoke my extrapolation of the honorary man category, the 'auxiliary man': women were a last resort in armed conflict and only under grave threat was it acceptable to mobilise women *in place of* men; unlike King's honorary man, gender is not entirely dismissed but acknowledged as an inferior replacement for male counterparts, however their irregularity as female fighters remains an unknown known (Pennington 2000; Goldstein 2001).

During WWII, female partisan units played no trivial role, yet, as discussed, they were only mobilised for combat reasons when Russia faced an extraordinarily high external threat, thus demonstrating that only in emergency situations, where operational exigencies compel the *de facto* inclusion of women, is mobilising an irregular (female) force acceptable (Goldstein 2001: 71; King, forthcoming). Invocation of emergency rhetoric during WWII depicts involuntary mobilisation of irregular forces, strengthening rhetoric against irregularity: it was acceptable because Russia was forced. This bolsters perceptions of irregularity and extra-normal activity whilst fostering the discernment that women would (or *should*) return to their former (normal) gender roles following the conclusion of war (and insurgencies), which consequently reifies the elucidation that women occupied an 'auxiliary man' role and that traditional gender categorisations remained exceedingly potent: women were reintegrated into 'their' role as mother and public recognition of these women relented after war, ergo reestablishing normality and 'regularity' (Enloe 1988: 166; Pennington 2000: 153-162). Thus, women's role in the military during WWII is indicative of another unknown known and Russia's double historic amnesia given that the government and society balked at the notion of women continuing in combat roles outside of catastrophic conditions, indicated by the swift demobilisation of female units (Ibid: 157). Russia, therefore, demonstrates a gendered selective memory where its inclusion of female irregular units was a decision taken with foul aftertaste, evidencing the double standard inherent in the oscillatory castigation and employment of (female) irregulars.

The implications of this are evident in the government's construction of the Shakhidki as doubly irregular: malestream assumptions were never overridden following the mobilisation of women as combat soldiers (thus, irregular) and the beautiful souls narrative prevailed at the lapse of emergency whereby violent females were (re)marginalised and disadvantaged by cultural representations (Sjoberg 2010: 62; MacKenzie 2010: 152-160). The employment of women has thus become a repressed artefact in contemporary Russian discourse, developing into an unknown known where ignorance to female irregulars' prominence is implicit in Russian policies that exemplify the alternating retribution (Chechnya) and hiring of irregulars (WWII) (Pennington 2000: 157). This, duly, contributed to the government's success in constructing the Shakhidki as committing a double transgression of regularity: they are not just irregular combatants anymore (here, terrorists) but sexually disturbed, crazed and demonised women whose

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agency for their actions is eradicated by a sexualised narrative sidelining true political motives that determined their logic for engaging in irregular warfare (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 110; 2008: 7). Such a narrative obliterates the possibility of national self-determination as a motivating factor and removes political agency. Furthermore, given Russia's evident position that women engaging in such unfeminine activity (combat) are damaged, the possibility that women make a conscious and tactical decision to engage in irregular warfare is explained away, which conflicts entirely with the overwhelming evidence of psychological normality amongst terrorists (Speckhard and Akhmedova 2006: 63; Richardson 2007: 38; English 2009: 28). In essence, the war against Chechen 'Black Widows' is one characterised with concern for maintaining gender norms, demanding 'regular' irregulars and crystallising the illegitimacy of irregulars more generally.

By 'forgetting' their successful employment of women in combat facing roles, and thus breaching of norms, Russia constructed the Shakhidki as a demonic threat challenging the very foundations of gender hierarchy that structure society. Ergo, the Shakhidki's transgression of femininity and the notion of 'regular' irregulars, constitutes a double irregularity whereby contravening the 'acceptable' boundaries of femininity, the Shakhidki afforded the Russian government the necessary weapon of war (Black Widow label) to institutionalise extra-normal, emergency action against the extra-normal characteristics of this female irregular threat that subsequently reduced women to bare life in the name of security (Scheipers 2015: 29; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 92-93, 100; Buzan et al. 1998: 23; Scheuerman 2006: 121). The Russian Government was able to (re)establish exclusionary norms at the heart of strategy and rhetoric on the Chechen national movement portraying it as engendering such a signifiant threat to societal norms that unbound action must be taken against the demonic and unconventional threat; thus, confirming the position that the term 'Black Widow' has been invoked as a derivative of the exclusionary 'irregular' category' and deployed as a weapon to cast female irregular fighters as monsters fighting with illegitimate motives (Scheipers 2015: 28-33). By infracting women's traditional subjugated roles, female irregulars are so insidious and poisonous (Black Widow rhetoric) to society that they must be stopped: such gendered rhetoric is demonstrative Russia's attempt to denounce violent women's agency and irregulars' legitimacy (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 89).

In fact, it is possible to argue that female 'irregular regular' units in WWII represented a similar challenge to Russian society as the Shakhidki. The principal difference being that the Shakhidki mobilised as an external, uncontrollable, threat challenging gender norms and Russia's authority, as opposed to being a tool (and thus subordinate) of Russian policymakers during an emergency situation, ergo explaining the unbound action by the Russian government towards the Shakhidki: they are not the preferred 'auxiliary men' but women with agency, making a choice to martyr themselves for political reasons — the antithesis to 'regular' tactics and the beautiful souls norm (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 103; Enloe 1989: 4). By characterising women as Black Widows in press releases the Russian government capitalised on the fear associated with the Shakhidki, demonstrating that Chechnya was, effectively, a conflict contingent on "changing gender dynamics between Russia and Chechnya [which] affected when and how violently Russians fought Chechens" to denounce their tactics (Sjoberg 2014: 21).

Such demonic depictions of the Shakhidki appear entirely paradoxical when pitted against Soviet Russia's mobilisation of women during WWII. However, by intersecting King's delineation that gender norms were not reconfigured, only placed on hold, and Joshua Goldstein's account that the rhetoric surrounding female combatants in WWII was primarily heroic and for pure propaganda purposes, I return to the notion of 'auxiliary man' (King, forthcoming; Goldstein 2001: 75). Following the end of WWII, women were normalised back into their roles as mother and subordinate (Pennington 2000: 157). This combined with the depictions of the Shakhidki that focus on the Black Widows as female-only units, insinuates that women, though capable of engaging in irregular warfare, are unable to operate alongside their male counterparts, thus reifying the constant abnormality of women in war and Russia's double historical amnesia. The monster narrative is fortified by depicting Shakhidki activity as abnormal and unnatural; this links back to propaganda mechanisms employed by Soviet Russia in WWII whereby the all-female (unconventional) units were propagandised to boost male military efficiency in light of morale and discipline breakdowns — the unknown known in both cases has been a factor used in a selective manner to the interest of Russian policy (Goldstein 2001: 75; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Propaganda has, therefore, played a central role in Russia's chosen depictions of the female combatant and I posit that this, now, constitutes double historical amnesia and an unknown known where Russia has been successful in repressing the positive role women played in battle during WWII when institutionalising extra-legal policies against the 'Black Widows' as 'illegitimate' actors, ergo

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demonstrating the assumption of an à la carte approach to dealing with irregulars where their employment and castigation is subject to state interest.

It is, thus, argued that women represented a way of inspiring mobilisation against a given threat, however, the threat in Chechnya was a source of security in WWII. During the latter, women were temporarily legitimate actors yet in the case of the former they became the demonic, insidious, and illegitimate 'Black Widow' irregulars constituting a threat to Russian society, ergo diverting attention from atrocities committed by the Russian government in its *Bespredel* and *Zachistki* policies (Eichler 2006: 501; Conley 2010: 334). Hence, it is evidenced that the government sought any explanation other than nationalism (legitimate cause) whereby the Shakhidki's double irregularity constituted the necessary monstrous scapegoat for extreme and unbound policies, consequently highlighting its double historical amnesia regarding its former legitimisation of women as irregulars, albeit short-lived (Pennington 2000: 158). Ergo, 'Black Widows' are the "latest stage of a discourse of Russian militarised masculinity aimed at legitimising the Russian State enterprise" by casting the Shakhidki as fighting for the wrong motives and having no right (as women) to take up arms (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 108; Scheipers 2015: 29).

Ultimately, what this paper establishes is that women in combat arms are inherently irregular given the malestream construction of the military; those women engaging in irregular warfare take on a twofold irregularity as female fighters *and* irregular combatants. Russian policymakers invoked a rhetoric demonising the Shakhidki beyond that of 'regular irregulars' and presented them as so insidious that unbound measures, reducing women to bare life, were institutionalised in a move that is indicative of double historic amnesia where Russia ignored its legitimisation of female irregulars and 'irregular regulars' during WWII. It is this point that is demonstrative of the auxiliary man category that has been argued to operate in conjunction with the unknown known nature of female units in WWII: women were *temporarily* afforded the position as an inferior *substitute* for men but overarching malestream hierarchies prevailed following the culmination of emergency. Hence, addressing the opening statement of this paper, it is entirely one-dimensional to denounce the USA for its pendular employment and punishment of irregulars as it is an internationally institutionalised norm to have double historical amnesia: selective categorisation of particular histories as unknown knowns, when it is advantageous to political interest, is legion. Ergo, the overarching point is that the term 'Black Widows' was constructed, like the term irregular, as a weapon of war that is symptomatic of double historical amnesia, ignorance and gender norm perpetuation and a societal balking at women with agency.

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