



In the Trenches: A Russian Woman Soldier's Story of World War I

by Tatiana L. Dubinskaya.

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Review by Jeff A. Bovarnick, US Army (jab55aa@icloud.com).

*In the Trenches*¹ is an autobiographical novel about Tatiana Dubinskaya's life as a Russian soldier. Its narrator, Zinaida (Zina) Kramskaya, a patriotic 15-year-old schoolgirl, runs away to serve her country in World War I. The author, initially disguised as a male, joined the Russian Army at fifteen and fought Germans and Austrians on the eastern front from spring 1916 through summer 1917. The book was the first full account of a female soldier in World War I. It was clearly influenced by Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 classic, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

The novel's fifteen chapters follow Zina's character as a front-line cavalry scout. Editor Kaplan provides a brief account of women serving in combat either openly or, more often, disguised as men. When males could not serve, disguised female relatives took their place; even when found out, they remained with their units, often filling front-line gaps. As more and more women came to serve in support roles—nurses and clerks, etc.—during the war, Russia in particular accepted them on battlefields as well. In 1916, a Russian journal published an account of young girls who ran away in 1914 to serve their country (vii). Dubinskaya did the same in the spring of 1916.

Chapters 1–3 begin with Zina leaving home and joining soldiers on a train heading to the front. An officer discovers the disguised Zina and orders “him” to be detained and sent home because it was “forbidden for any volunteer boys to tag along with any regiment” (4). She escapes, volunteers with a scout unit,² gets a uniform and boots, and marches to the regiment's front line in western Ukraine. Despite close quarters in the trenches, the scouts do not discover her identity. When the Division Commander learns she is female, he allows her to remain in the ranks (19–21).

Chapters 3–9 chronicle a series of battles fought from July through December 1916. They vividly evoke the horrors of combat and the trials of being a female in the trenches, including proving herself in combat and fending off her lieutenant's unwanted advances. Zina watches a German soldier bayonet a Russian soldier, who died as “he tried to tighten all of his muscles as if to stop the steel from going through his stomach” (50). One particular soldier doubted her place in combat: “not with my valor in battle, not with my patience in the trenches, not with my endurance during the marches could I gain his trust” (53). She was conscious of her reaction to enemy fire: “when a bullet struck near my feet I got scared, but I hid it well. I wanted to show all the guys that I was a woman and not afraid” (79). Added to the stress of combat was the threat of rape by her lieutenant; one night, only a fellow scout's intervention prevented a sexual assault. For fear of retaliation, they did not report the officer, who continued to mock Zina in public (71).

Chapters 10–15 cover the last six months of Zina's tour in the Russian Army, coinciding with the Russian Revolution, the abdication of Czar Nicholas II (Mar. 1917), and her regiment's dis-

1. Orig. *V okopakh* (Moscow: Izd-vo “Federatsiia,” 1930).

2. Fourth Platoon, 3rd Company, 1st Battalion, 74th Stavropolsky Infantry Regiment, 12th Division.

bandment the following summer. During the “brutally cold winter of 1916,” Zina arrives for a shift of guard duty only to discover the man she was to relieve has frozen to death (105–6). While other soldiers resort to self-inflicted wounds to avoid combat (108), Zina earns the St. George Cross³ for bravery in a battle near the village of Simki. At home on leave in December 1916, Zina questions the purpose of the war and begins to show signs of her ensuing nervous breakdown (123). As the country turns to revolution, Zina’s family tries to keep her home. Nevertheless, she returns to the front, where she witnesses two more comrades killed in a shelling: she is left with images of one friend’s foot sticking out of a pile of debris, and another’s mouth filled with dirt (133–34).

In March 1917, with rumors of the czar’s demise, soldiers conclude it is up to them to fight or not (140).⁴ As melting snow floods the trenches, troops wade in water up to their stomachs during bombardments (143–44). Later, when “it’s quiet on the front lines,” the Russians, Germans and Austrians fraternize in the trenches before the shelling resumes (147–48). Following the overthrow of the czar, Russia’s Provisional Government sends the Minister of War to the front to persuade the troops to keep fighting, but their will to do so continues to wane (151).

In June 1917, Zina (and presumably Dubinskaya) has a nervous breakdown during an enemy attack. With soldiers dying and shells falling around her, she deserts her unit. While on the run, she sees officers machine-gunning retreating soldiers. After she sees a dog eating a bloody human bone, she hears herself screaming and wakes up in a hospital (157–59). While there, Zina joins the revolutionary cause. As the Austrians advance, the patients evacuate. Zina rejoins the remnants of her unit and learns that her cohorts, too, have joined the Bolshevik movement. Before her regiment disbands, Zina witnesses the remaining scouts murder their regimental colonel (171). The novel abruptly ends with the Russian Army retreating in summer 1917.

Dubinskaya joined the Red Army and served as a soldier and nurse during Russia’s Civil War (1917–22). Afterward, she was a typist for the Red Army and then a writer for the Communist Party. After composing a series of articles, she published *In the Trenches* in 1930. She later joined the newly formed Union of Soviet Writers and published a shorter revision of her book entitled *Machine Gunner* (1936), espousing communist ideals.⁵ It stresses, Kaplan writes, the “fervor that ushered in the March 1917 revolution, and highlights Dubinskaya’s role as a staunch supporter of the revolutionary cause” (ix).

While not on the artistic level of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, to which it has been compared, Tatiana Dubinskaya’s *In the Trenches* is one of a precious “limited number of early twentieth-century Russian warrior women writings” (x), offering a unique Russian-soldier perspective on the Eastern Front.

3. The highest award available to Russian soldiers (182).

4. The March 1917 Russian Revolution ushered in regimental soldiers’ committees throughout the Russian Army. The committees had to clear all orders, usually drafted by activist soldiers, before they could be issued. The committees could veto orders, greatly constraining operations (183).

5. Dubinskaya died in 1990 (xi); she married four times and had one son with her first husband, a Red Army Commander, in 1920. Little else is known about her.