**Questions:**

1. How was Marina Raskova able to convince Joseph Stalin to form all-women air regiments during World War II?

2. How did Marina Raskova pave the way for other women to join the Red Army?

3. What was the motive behind Stalin allowing women into the Red Army?

4. Did Raskova's actions (of forming the first all-women air regiments in the USSR during World War II) affect other countries? Is so how?

5. During and after World War II, Soviet women were shown in propaganda posters and cartoons. What was the significance of these posters and cartoons?

6. How did Raskova's subordinated view her?

**Answers:**

First of all, it was the politics of the Russia and then the Soviet Union that changed the culture of the land and allowed women to participate in professions that used to be closed to them. For better or worse, after the 1917 Revolution (The October Revolution) Lenin looked at a country that had a feudal economic system that the rest of Europe had gotten rid of 150 years earlier. The population was mostly uneducated and Russia was decades behind the rest of Europe in technology. Russia is a huge country with a lot of resources but few of them had been developed. The country was under orders to modernize. It was said they had to leap forward 50 years in the next 10 years. That meant everybody, both men and women, had to accomplish this.

Women were given rights that were even beyond other countries at the time. Both boys and girls received equal education.  When it came time to go into the workforce, women could be engineers, chemists, designers, factory workers, or any profession that a man could enter into. Many women learned to fly in Soviet flying clubs. These clubs were free to join. By 1941, there were about 3000 licensed women pilots in the USSR (Mostly from Russia and Ukraine).

Josef Stalin, who came to power after Lenin died, was a dictator and a man with serious issues of paranoia. In the 1930s he forced the farms of Ukraine into collectives and over one-million Ukrainians starved to death. He believe the military was plotting against him and had thousands officers in the Soviet military executed or put into prison. He even imprisoned the USSR’s best aircraft designers. Far more disastrous was his peace agreement with Adolf Hitler called a non-aggression pact. Stalin believed he could buy Hitler off by supplying raw materials to Germany. He believed that Germany would never attack the Soviet Union.

On June 22, 1941 at 3:00 AM the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union. The Germans sent in three million men, over a thousand tanks and 2,500 aircraft. Over 4,000 Soviet fighters and bombers were destroyed on the ground in the first hours of the attack. The Red Army, totally unprepared, went into full retreat and it looked like the Nazis would quickly defeat the USSR.

You must remember, the war that Hitler launched against the USSR was not to accomplish a political goal. The aim of Germany was the extermination the Slavic people and to take their lands. The Nazis considered Slavs, like Russians and Ukrainians to be sub-human. When I give talks on this subject, the closet thing I can compare the Nazi invasion to is the movie Independence Day, where the goal of the aliens was to exterminate the human race. The entire country was mobilized in a life or death struggle against the Nazis.

The USSR had women in their military, about 8% of the armed forces were women and after the invasion, many were put into combat roles. However, it was Marina Raskova who convinced Stalin to form three air regiments in October of 1941.

Marina Raskova held the same level of respect and admiration in the USSR as Amelia Earhart held in the USA.  Marina was born in Moscow in 1912 and was the daughter of a music teacher. She studied engineering and drafting and worked at the Soviet Air Force Academy, becoming the Soviet Air Force’s first woman navigator.  In 1938, Marina Raskova and an all female crew flew a converted bomber the entire width of the Soviet Union, a greater distance than Charles Lindbergh’s flight across the Atlantic. The plane had trouble and Marinawas forced to bail out over cold and deserted Siberia. The aircraft crash landed in a swamp but Marina Raskova was lost in the wilds of Siberia for 10 days. The women, however, achieved their mission. Marina was awarded “Hero of the Soviet Union” by Stalin. She had “rock star” status.

By October of 1941, the military situation was desperate. Stalin had already ordered a policy of no retreat for the army and had entire factories taken apart and shipped east, past the Ural Mountains to be reassembled to make weapons. The USSR was losing the war and Stalin was desperate to try anything to raise the patriotic spirit of the nation, even opening the churches which had been closed under Communism. When Marina Raskova came to Stalin, he agreed to have her form three air regiments. It’s hard to say, given the size of the USSR and the thousands of planes and pilots needed, if Stalin really thought three more regiments would have any effect on the war or not. It’s possible that he agreed for propaganda purposes to spur on the people to fight harder, but he agreed and Marina began the training at Engles Air Force Academy forming the 586 fighter regiment, the 587 light bomber regiment and the 588 night bombing regiment, known to the Germans as the “Night Witches.”

The women pilots worshiped Marina Raskova, some traveling hundreds of miles over many days to beg to be accepted. All the women of the Red Air Force were volunteers. The great fighter ace Lydia Litvyak who learned to fly at fifteen even lied about the number of her flight hours in order to be accepted.  From Engles came great women pilots like Katya Budonova, Nadia Popova, Anna Yagorova, Polina Gellman, Natalia Meklin, and or course, Lydia Litvyak.

In January of 1943, the women of the 587th bomber regiment (the 587th flew the Pe-2 twin engine bomber) were eagerly awaiting the return of their commander, Marina Raskova, when a woman entered the barracks with terrible news. Marina Raskova had been killed in a landing accident. The Pe-2 bomber she was in was landing in a snowstorm. The pilot missed the runway and crashed. Marina and the crew were killed. The women were devastated by her death. The 586th fighter regiment and 587th bomber regiment were broken up with the women scattered to mixed male-female regiments. At first the male pilots did not want the women flying with them, but later, after the women proved their ability, they became the preferred “wingmen” because they were very dedicated to staying with their flight leaders.  Fighter ace Lydia Litvyak began flying with her flight leader Alexei Solomatin. They became close friends and fell in love. It was a great tragedy when Alexei was killed. Anna Yegorva who was an IL-2 pilot became deputy commander of an all male squadron. She was shot down over Poland, tortured and nearly killed by the Nazis. After the war she recovered and married her commanding officer.  As for the 588th night bombing regiment they did not want to be broken up and so, they began their own training program. Women pilots trained navigators to be pilots, the navigators trained mechanics to be navigators and so on. The 588th lost 1/3 of their women pilots and navigators in combat. Every woman pilot of the 588th who survived the war flew over 500 missions with some having flown over 800 missions.

As to your question of paving the way for other women in the Red Army, the number of women serving was around 8% and by the height of the war, some 10 million soldiers served, so 8% was a large number. Women served as infantry, snipers, and tank drivers and tank commanders. The women of the Red Air Force were also mechanics, gunners, and navigators, as well as pilots.  This was a war for survival. The Nazis were committing mass murder of the population, burning villages to the ground and taking away tens of thousands of men and women to be worked to death as slaves. Everyone was fighting for their very survival.

You asked about other countries and how the use of women combat pilots would have been viewed. The USA had women pilots known as the WAFS (Women’s Auxiliary Ferry Pilots) who flew bombers and fighters fresh from factories to forward air bases. These planes were picked up by male pilots and then flown to combat areas. Planes were even ferried to Alaska, where Russian pilots would pick up American made fighters and bombers. We provided the USSR with something like 11,000 aircraft. Of that number were 4,800 P-39 fighters.  Our women pilots did a great service in the war by ferrying these planes to forward bases. There were over 1000 women ferry pilots. More than a few died in landing and weather related accidents. However, none actually flew in combat.

In England, women flew light spotter planes looking for German U-Boats off shore. They would radio the RAF who would then send bombers after the U-Boats. There is some information that a few of the women were able to drop light bombs on suspected German U-Boats, but this was the extent of any combat and there is no record of any actual U-Boat sinking by English women pilots.

The Germans and Japanese never considered the use of women combat pilots, although Germany’s top test pilot was a woman named Hanna Reitsch, the only German woman to be awarded the Iron Cross.

Soviet art was known as Soviet Realism and featured images of strong men and women building bridges or farming, to encourage the modernization of the county. This artwork was used as propaganda during the war to stir up a patriotic spirit. Using the women pilots was part of this process, so their images were featured.  What was unfortunate was how the women pilots were treated after the war. They were denied further service in the Red Air Force for “medical reasons.” They were made to resign their commissions and some were told to go home and have babies. The 588th Night Bomber Regiment was not even allowed to fly over Moscow to celebrate the victory over Germany.

I hope this all helps and good luck with your project!  If anyone wants to visit my website, it is [www.chrisbfla.webs.com](http://www.chrisbfla.webs.com/)  My science fiction novel ACE OF ACES features Soviet ace, Lydia Litvyak as one of five fighter pilots taken into the future to fight a way against an alien race.