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

**A:** The horrific losses in aircraft and trained aircrews in the German onslaught following June 22, 1941, combined with Raskova’s pioneering exploits in the 1930s, helped her to convince Stalin that the USSR’s pool of qualified aviatrixes could help fill the ranks until new airmen could be trained and replace those initial losses.

**Q:** Did her actions (of forming the first all-women air regiments in the USSR during World War II) affect other countries? Is so how?

**A:** Other nations had been using women in auxiliary roles (as mainly ferry and test pilots) from the beginning of the war (the USAAF needed some convincing at first, but eventually started using its available women). Romania had a five-woman squadron doing medevac duties, but it was the only country outside of the Soviet Union to allow women near the front. Only the USSR used them in a combat role (besides the night bombers, the 586th IAP flew Yak fighters in defense of factories and the 587th BAP flew Petlyakov Pe-2 dive bombers at the front).

**Q:** How and why did the Germans come up with the name Night Witches ("Nachthexen")?

**A:** The little Polikarpov Po-2 biplanes of the 588th NBAP (later the 46th GvNBAP) caused little material damage, but their constant night harassment attacks kept German soldiers up at night, depriving them of sleep and undermining their ability to soldier. It was mainly for that reason that they began calling the women of that unit “*Nachthexen*.”

**Q:** How did men in the Red Army view these Soviet women who entered combat, alongside Raskova?

**A:** The Soviet Union may have been progressive and egalitarian in theory, but changing the Russian mentality was not so easily accomplished. Whether in all-female regiments or farmed out to male units, the women who had contact with the men encountered sexual harassment and had to prove themselves to skeptical male squadron mates, with varying degrees of success. After the war the general Russian attitude was to be grateful for the achievements and sacrifices of its aviatrixes, followed by mass discharges, often with remarks to the effect that they could now get on with finding a husband and returning to the kitchen. Only an outstanding or insistent few continued careers in the Soviet air arms. As for Maria Raskova? She had been killed in an air accident during the war. It would take another generation for female military aviators to be taken as seriously as those who had flown in World War II. Valentina Tereshkova helped revive it when she became the first woman to orbit the earth in June 1963, but the female space program was dissolved in 1969 and it would be another 19 years before the next Russian woman, Svetlana Savitskaya, went into space.

PS: When bandying about the term “Night Witches,” keep in mind that the survivors of the 46th Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment hated the term—it had been coined by the Germans (“*Nachthexen*”), and as they advanced with the Red Army they reported found newly liberated locals were surprised to find them to be normal and sometimes even attractive young ladies, rather than the “ugly witches” described by the Germans!