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Red Sky, Black Death

by Cristian Barrea

(History 2225)

R*ed Sky, Black Death* is a memoir by Anna Yegorova which tells the story of a village girl whose dreams, ambition and a desire to serve her nation led her to become a decorated pilot of the Soviet Union. Anna's memoir begins a few years prior to the start of World War II, or as the Russians called it The Great Patriotic War, and recounts her journey leaving her village to work in the underground metro construction in Moscow to her training to become a pilot and her many missions in the Eastern Front of the War. Her memoir is full of themes such as courage, brotherhood and family but it is her patriotism and desire to overcome barriers as a woman that appear several times throughout her story.

Anna Yegorova decides to start her story before she joins the Air Force and includes a chapter called Volodovo¹ which is a conversation she had with her mother. This story is significant because not only did this take place before the war but because it discusses her patriotism towards the Soviet Union. This conversation shows the opposing views Anna and her mother had towards the communists' rule. Anna's mother states "The parish had such a lovely church, with a high bell tower. That bell was so loud, you could hear it even in our village, calling us to Mass. But Soviet power destroyed all that."² Anna's brother asks if she believed life was better before the revolution to which she says absolutely. Anna replies saying "How can you keep glorifying pre-revolutionary times? Look around! What have we inherited from those days? The past has given us nothing but poverty and ruins. Socialism is a new start for us!"³ Anna includes this conversation because of its significance regarding her views towards The Communist Party which ultimately is the reason she is able to become a pilot. Anna would leave her home because "the newspapers issued a call to action...to take part in the Five-Year Plan."⁴ She left for Moscow to become a Komsomol at the Metrostoy. Her eagerness to do her part in the communist nation can be seen when she accepts a position as a steel framework fitter regardless of what the job entailed and her lack of knowledge to do the job.⁵ Through her work in the Metrostoy construction she would read a newspaper announcement regarding the Aeroclub. Once again, her desire to serve pushes her to new challenges. "We Komsomol-Metrostoy had followed our heart to serve our motherland in the mines and now hoped to ascend into the boundless skies."⁶ Anna became a pilot and when the war began she wanted to join just as "many young men and women from the Metrostoy heeded the call."⁷ The Soviet Union was successful in uniting its people towards the war effort. "The people and the party gradually banded together in an all-out struggle to defend the country and repulse the German aggressors"⁸ or Fascist

¹ Anna Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death: A Soviet Woman Pilot's Memoir of the Eastern Front* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2009), 12-14

² Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 12

³ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 13

⁴ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 18

⁵ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 19

⁶ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 30

⁷ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 42

⁸ John M. Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union: A Historical Introduction from the Kievan State to the Present*, 7th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), 252

rats as Yegorova called them. Many times, Anna shows her patriotism but the Soviet Union would not always reward her for it. Although she volunteered to fly many dangerous missions at the front she was almost not allowed to become a pilot.

Anna's brother Vasya had been accused of being an enemy of the state. He was tried in a tribunal and accused of espionage and ties to British spies. The accusation was derived because an article he had published was copied by British intelligence. Vasya was sentenced to ten years' confinement but it also caused Anna to be expelled from the Ulyanovsk Flying School.⁹ She was later admitted because the nation was in desperate need of pilots and because she had to deny her brother. The most severe situation in which Anna's patriotism would be tested came after she was rescued as a prisoner of war. Following her liberation, she was taken to the SMERSH counterintelligence department as a suspicious personage.¹⁰ Anna was questioned, her Party card and awards taken away, and accused of being a Fascist. Eventually she was released but her time as a prisoner of war was never recognized. This was because Joseph Stalin had stated "we have no prisoners of war, we have traitors."¹¹ Anna would be denied her Communist Party membership card after she was released and would not be able to recover it for many years. She attempted to track it after the war and was denied by a political officer because she had been a prisoner of war. Anna would persist to recover her membership by standing in front of the Party Collegium and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee where once again she was accused of being a German spy.¹² She would be reinstated and her patriotism would not be shattered. When conversing with a fellow pilot, Lyova Kabischer, years after the war she still defended the government system even after all she had been accused of.¹³ Anna acknowledged how being a German captive would mark you as an enemy to the bureaucrats but it did not matter to her because she was rehabilitated.¹⁴ Anna was not alone when it came to being patriotic. "Soviet patriotism could justifiably boast the Red Army's triumphs and the people's total mobilization for the war effort."¹⁵

One of the major themes in Anna's memoir is her attempt to overcome discrimination as a woman. During her time working at the Metrostroy the women were not allowed to work in the hermetically sealed chambers because the doctors claimed they would not be able to have babies afterwards. Anna stated, "we girls didn't want to fall behind the boys"¹⁶. Not only would she face opposition to work certain jobs at the Metrostroy but also when applying to the aeroclub to train as a pilot. When it came to fighting in the war Anna makes it a point to explain "yes, we women prepared to defend our motherland, too."¹⁷ She explains that the State Defense Committee issued a decree drafting women into the Armed services. Anna would initially be part of the Liaison Corps and later the Air Force.¹⁸ She would have to prove herself as an outstanding Liaison Pilot before she would be allowed to become a Combat Pilot. "We don't draft females for front-line combat." To which Anna replies "Do you really need to be drafted to fight for your country?"¹⁹ Anna would add an entire chapter dedicated to her achievement becoming a combat pilot. When she finally joined her regiment

⁹ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 50-54

¹⁰ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 196

¹¹ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 189

¹² Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 206

¹³ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 208

¹⁴ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 210

¹⁵ Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union*, 252

¹⁶ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 19

¹⁷ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 42

¹⁸ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 42

¹⁹ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 70

there were some personnel who disapproved of her and the regional navigator stated “It’s not a ‘woman’ who’s come to the regiment, but a combat pilot,” She would still face opposition when it came to piloting the Shturmovik. Anna’s response was “And how, may I ask is anything about this was appropriate for a woman? ...it seems to me that now isn’t the time to make distinctions between men and women, not until we’ve purged the motherland of Hitlerites.”²⁰ Anna had to prove herself time and time again she was as capable as any men. Her closing statement in the memoir shows how important it was for her to be a strong woman. “Russian literature boasts of our proud Slavic women, who can ‘curb a galloping horse’ or ‘walk into a burning hut.’ Those are big shoes to fill. But I think the war showed the whole world who these ‘women in Russian villages’ are...but how much sorrow can the Russian woman endure? And why must she? I doubt whether anyone could bear more.”²¹

Red Sky, Black Death takes the reader into the World War II eastern front where a young Russian woman fought fearlessly to protect her home. Anna Yegorova is a Komsomol, Liaison and combat pilot, prisoner of war, wife and mother whose life is an example of her courage. As a woman in the Soviet Union she showed her love for her country answering the call to serve on numerous occasions. Her patriotism and that of many others was crucial in winning the war for the Soviet Union. She broke down barriers as a woman who achieved her dream of flying and being one of the few women to become a combat pilot. Anna’s memoir is captivating and full of war stories that lets the reader see everything from her eyes.

²⁰ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 118

²¹ Timofeyeva-Yegorova, *Red Sky, Black Death*, 213