

MARIA BOTCHKAREVA, DAUGHTER OF TOIL, BECOMES COMMANDER OF BATTALION

Peasant Girl Soldier Addresses the Duma Suggesting the Establishment of the Battalion of Death, Fighting Unit Composed of Women



Rodizanko, President of the Duma

The Idea Pleases Hearers and Rodizanko Arranges for Interview With General Brusilov and Kerenky, Who Approve Her Plans

and his wife into the former imperial box. The house was packed, the receipts of the ticket office amounting to 20,000 rubles. Everybody seemed to point at me, and it was with great difficulty that I could get my feet under me. Kerenky appeared and was given a tremendous ovation. He spoke only about ten minutes. Next on the program was Mrs. Kerenky, and I was to follow her. Mrs. Kerenky, however, broke down as soon as she came out in the limelight. That did not add to my courage. I was led out as if in a procession.

"Men and women citizens!" I heard my voice say. "Our mother is perishing. Our mother is Russia. I want to help save her. I want women whose hearts are crystal whose souls are pure, whose impulses are lofty. With such women setting an example of self-sacrifice, you men will realize your duty in this grave hour!"

Then I stopped and could not proceed. Sobs choked the words in my memory. I shook my legs as they were being carried under the arm and led away under a thunderous outburst of applause.

Registration of volunteers for the battalion from among those present took place the same evening, there and then. So great was the enthusiasm that 1500 women applied for enlistment. It was necessary to put quarters at my immediate disposal and it was decided to let me have the building and grounds of the Koinonik Women's Institute, and I directed the women to come there on the morrow, when they would be examined and officially enlisted.

Plan Gets Publicity The newspapers carried accounts of the meeting and other publicity helped to swell the number of women who volunteered to join the battalion of death to 2000. They were gathered in the garden of the institute, all in the state of jubilation. I arrived with Staff Captain Kuzmin, assistant to General Polovtzev, Captain Dementiev and General Anosov, who were well disciplined, could maintain good order and knew all the tricks of the military game so as to be able to complete the course of instruction in two weeks. He sent me twenty-five petty officers of all grades from the Volynsk Regiment.

Then there was the question of supplies. Were we to have our own kitchen? It was found more expedient not to establish one of our own, but to make use of the kitchen of a guard regiment, stationed not far from our quarters. The ration was that of regular troops, consisting of two pounds of bread, cabbage soup, kasha, sugar and tea. I would send a company at a time, equipped with palisades for their meals.

On the morning of May 26 all the recruits gathered at the grounds of the institute. I had them placed in rows so as to distribute them according to their height, and divided the whole body into two battalions of approximately 1000 each. Each battalion was divided into four companies and each company subdivided into four platoons. There was a man instructor in command of every platoon, and in addition, there was a petty officer in command of every company, so that altogether I had to increase the number of men instructors to forty.

I addressed the girls again, informing them that from the moment they entered upon their duties they were no longer women, but soldiers. I told them that they would not be allowed to leave the grounds and that only between 6 and 8 in the evening they would be permitted to receive relatives and friends. From among the more intelligent recruits—and there were many university graduates in the battalion—I selected a number for promotion to platoon and company officers, their function being limited at first to the internal management of the organization, since the men officers were purely instructors, returning to their barracks at the end of the day's training.

Next I marched the recruits to four barber shops, where from five in the morning to twelve at noon a number of barbers, using clippers, closely cropped every head after another. Crows outside the shops watched this unprecedented procedure, greeting with derision every hairless girl that emerged, perhaps with an aching heart, from the barber's parlors.

The same afternoon my soldiers received their first lessons in the large garden. The organization since the men officers were purely instructors, returning to their barracks at the end of the day's training. Next I marched the recruits to four barber shops, where from five in the morning to twelve at noon a number of barbers, using clippers, closely cropped every head after another.

Every one of you to bed this instant! I want you to be so quiet that I could hear a fly buzz. Tomorrow you will be up at 5 o'clock." I spent a sleepless night. There were many things to think about and many worries to overcome. At 6 only the officer in charge was up. Not a soul stirred in the barracks. The officer reported to me that she called a couple of times on the girls to arise, but none of them moved. I came out and in a thundering voice ordered:

"Arise!" The girls sprang up. Frightened and sleepless, my recruits left their beds. As soon as they got through dressing and washing there was a call to prayer. I made praying a daily duty. Breakfast followed, consisting of tea and bread. At 8 I had issued an order that the companies should all, in fifteen minutes, be formed into ranks ready for review. I came out, passed each company, greeting it. The company would answer in a chorus: "Zdravija zheleznaja, gospodin Natchalnik!" (Good health, sir chief!). For several days the drilling went on, the girls acquiring the rudiments of soldiering. On several occasions I resorted to slapping as punishment for misbehavior.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

THIS STARTS THE STORY

In the summer of 1917 Maria Botchkareva formed the Battalion of Death, a woman's fighting unit in the Russian army, and a Russian peasant girl made into the international hall of fame. In the early installments of this story she told of the hardships of her childhood, the realization of her wish to become a soldier. She tells of battles bravely won and of the disorganization in the army following the overthrow of the Czar. She leaves the army because the soldiers will no longer fight and goes to Petrograd, where M. Rodizanko, president of the Duma, befriends her.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

President Rodizanko then came out, exclaiming cheerfully: "Herotichnik mine! I am glad you came," and he kissed me on the cheek. He then presented me to his wife as his herotichnik, pointing to my military uniform. She was very kind and very generous in her praise. "You have come just in time for dinner," she said, showing me into her bathroom to remove the traces now scattered there. This warm reception heartened me greatly.

At the table the conversation turned to the state of the country. I was asked to tell of the latest developments. I said, as nearly as I can remember: "The agitation to leave the trenches and go home is growing. If there will be no immediate offensive, all is lost. The soldiers will leave. It is also urgent to return the troops now scattered in the rear to the fighting line."

Rodizanko answered approximately: "Orders have been given to many units in the rear to go to the front. However, not all obeyed. There were demonstrations and protests on the part of several bodies, due to Bolshevik propaganda."

That was the first time I ever heard of the Bolsheviks. It was May, 1917. "Who are they?" I asked. "They are a group, led by one Lenin, who just returned from abroad by way of Germany, and Trotzki, Komolov and other political emigrants. They attend the meetings of the Soviet at the Taurida Palace, in which the Duma meets, inlets to strife among classes, and cause the most serious trouble."

I was further asked how Kerenky then stood with the soldiers, being informed that he had just left for a tour of the front. "Kerenky is very popular. In fact, the most popular man with the front. The men will do anything for him," I replied.

Kerenky Too Free Rodizanko then related an incident which made us all laugh. There was an old doorman in the government offices who had served many ministers of the Czar. Kerenky, it appeared, would shake hands with everybody. So that whenever he entered his office he shook hands with the old doorman, quickly becoming the laughing stock of the servants.

"Now what kind of a minister is it," the old footman was overheard complaining to a fellow servant, "who shakes hands with me?" After dinner Rodizanko took me to the Taurida Palace, where he introduced me to a gathering of soldiers' delegates, then a session. I was given a seat and a prominent place. The speakers told of conditions at various sections of the front that talked excitedly with my observations. Discipline was a trite matter, was on the increase, the agitation to leave the trenches was gaining strength. Something had to be done quickly, they argued. How can the men be kept till the moment when an offensive is ordered? That was the problem.

Rodizanko arose and suggested that he be asked to offer a solution. He told them that I was a peasant girl who had volunteered early in the war and fought and suffered with the men. Therefore, he thought, I ought to know what was the right thing to do. Naturally, I was thrown into confusion. I was totally unprepared to suggest any suggestions and, therefore, begged to be excused for a while till I thought the matter over.

The sessions continued, while I sank deep into thought. For half an hour I asked my brain in vain. Then suddenly an idea dawned upon me. It was the idea of a women's battalion of death.

"You heard of what I have gone through and what I have done as a soldier," I turned to the audience upon getting the floor. "Now, how would it do to organize 300 women like me to serve as an example to the army and lead the men into battle?" Rodizanko approved of my idea. "Provided," he added, "we could find hundreds more like Maria Botchkareva, which I greatly doubt."

To this objection I replied that numbers were immaterial, that what was important was to shame the men and that a few women at one place could serve as an example to the entire front. "It would be necessary that the women's organization should have no committees and be run on the regular army basis in order to enable it to serve as a restorative," I further explained.

Rodizanko thought my suggestion splendid and pictured the enthusiasm that would be bound to be provoked among the men in case of women occupying some trenches and taking the lead in an offensive.

Objections to Plan There were objections, however, from the floor. One delegate got up and said: "None of us will take exception to a soldier like Botchkareva. The men on the front know her and have heard of her deeds. But who will guarantee that the other women will be as brave as she and will not dishonor the army?"

"I take up the organization of a women's battalion I will hold myself responsible for," I replied. "I would introduce rigid discipline and would allow no speech-making and no interfering in the streets. When Mother was an army by committee, I am a woman peasant myself, and I know that only discipline can save the Russian. In the proposed battalion I would exercise absolute authority and get obedience. Otherwise, there would be no use in organizing it. There were no objections to the conclusion which I outlined as preliminary to the establishment of such a unit. I never expected that it would be so difficult to consider the matter. I would permit me to carry out the idea, although I was informed that it would be submitted to

Kerenky upon his return from the front. President Rodizanko took a deep interest in the project. He introduced me to Captain Dementiev, commander of the Home for Invalids, asking him to place a room or two at my disposal and generally take care of me. I went home with the captain, who presented me to his wife, a dear and patriotic woman who soon became very much attached to me.

The following morning Rodizanko telephoned, suggesting that before the matter was broached to the War Minister, Kerenky, it would be wise to take it up with the commander-in-chief, General Brusilov, who could pass upon it from the point of view of the army. If he approved of it, it would be easier to obtain Kerenky's permission.

General headquarters were then at Mochiliev and there we went, Captain Dementiev and I, to obtain an audience with the commander-in-chief. We were received by his adjutant on the 14th of May. He announced our arrival and purpose to General Brusilov, who had us shown in the War Minister's office. It was such a sudden metamorphosis and I could not believe it. I was in the presence of the commander-in-chief. It was such a sudden metamorphosis and I could not believe it. I was in the presence of the commander-in-chief.

Hardly a week had elapsed since I left the front, and here I was again, this time not in the trenches, however, but in the presence of the commander-in-chief. It was such a sudden metamorphosis and I could not believe it. I was in the presence of the commander-in-chief.

I was seized with fright and objected strenuously that I could never appear publicly and that I would not know what to talk about. "You will tell the same things that you told Rodizanko, Brusilov and Kerenky. Just tell how you feel about the front and the country," they said, brushing away my objections.

I told him about my training and my leaving the front because I could not reconcile myself to the prevailing conditions. I explained that the purpose of the plan would be to shame the men in the trenches by having the women go over the top first. The commander-in-chief then discussed the matter from various angles and he approved and approved of my idea. He bade us adieu expressing his hope for the success of my enterprise and, in a happy frame of mind, I left for Petrograd.

Kerenky Grants Audience Kerenky had returned from the front. We called on Rodizanko and told him of the result of our mission. He informed us that he had already asked for an audience with Kerenky and that the latter wanted to see him at 7 o'clock the following morning, when he would broach the subject to him. After his call on Kerenky Rodizanko telephoned to tell us that he had arranged for an audience for me with Kerenky at the Winter Palace at noon the next day.

Captain Dementiev drove me to the Winter Palace and a few minutes before 12 I was in the ante-chamber of the War Minister. I was surprised to find General Brusilov there and he asked me if I came to see Kerenky about the same matter. I replied in the affirmative. He offered to support my idea with the War Minister and introduced me right there to General Polovtzev, commander of the Petrograd Military District, who was with him.

"Holy Father," I prayed, my eyes streaming with tears, "show Thy humble servant the path to truth. I am afraid, instill courage into my heart. I can feel my knees give way; steady them with Thy strength. My mind is groping in the dark; illumine it with Thy light. My speech is but a common talk of an ignorant babe; make it flow with Thy wisdom and penetrate the hearts of my hearers. Do all this, not for the sake of Thy humble Maria, but for the sake of Russia, my unhappy country."

My eyes were red with inflammation when I arose in the morning. I continued nervous all day. Captain Dementiev suggested that I commit my speech to memory. I rejected his suggestion with the comment: "I have placed my trust in God and rely on Him to put the right words into my mouth."

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and his wife into the former imperial box. The house was packed, the receipts of the ticket office amounting to 20,000 rubles. Everybody seemed to point at me, and it was with great difficulty that I could get my feet under me. Kerenky appeared and was given a tremendous ovation. He spoke only about ten minutes. Next on the program was Mrs. Kerenky, and I was to follow her. Mrs. Kerenky, however, broke down as soon as she came out in the limelight. That did not add to my courage. I was led out as if in a procession.

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Table listing Fur Coats and their prices. Regularly vs Now prices for Marmot Coats, Natural Nutria Coats, Muskrat Coats, Taupes Nutria Coats, Hudson Seal Coats, Hudson Seal Coats, Natural Squirrel, MoleSkin Coat, Caracul Coat, Mink Coat, Broadtail Coat, Mink Coat.

Table listing Fur Sets and their prices. Prices for Nutria Sets, Black Fox Sets, Hudson Seal Sets, Taupe Wolf Sets, Pointed Fox Sets, Black Wolf Sets, Skunk Sets, Taupe Fox Sets, Brown Fox Sets, Beaver Set, Natural Fisher Set, Hudson Bay Sable Set.

Table listing Fur Scarfs and Stoles and their prices. Prices for Hudson Seal Scarfs, Black Lynx Scarfs, Hudson Seal Stoles, Natural Squirrel Stoles, Beaver Stole, MoleSkin Stoles, Natural Blue Fox, Silver Fox Scarf.

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