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IN SEARCH OF SELF-IDENTITY AS A WOMAN PARTICIPANT IN THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR: LIUSIA ARGUTINSKAIA'S NOVEL *OGNENNYI PUT'* (*THE FIERY PATH*, 1932)

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“Only one thing I knew firmly and clearly: everything old was gone, gone forever, there is nothing but the present life, the fighter family, the struggle for the matter for which the whole mass of people was going.”

(Argutinskaia, *Ognennyi put'* 51)¹

In her novel *Ognennyi put'* (*The Fiery Path*, 1932), Liusia Argutinskaia reflects on the involvement of a woman member of the intelligentsia among the “mass of people” in the Russian Civil War. The novel has not been analyzed before, but it deserves scholarly attention since it presents important material from a historical and literary point of view. First, the novel describes the participation of a woman in the civil war based on the author’s autobiographical experience. The novel has historical and cultural value, as it documents both the civil war and its reception during the Stalinist period, and such detailed testimonies from women were quite rare in the 1920s and 1930s. The civil war model of “youth as a warrior and a rebel” was “a male image, for there were almost no female representations of the vanguard in these early works” (Tirado 240). The novel provides a much-needed feminine perspective on the civil war: most representations of women in the Red Army were created by prominent male writers, while the lack of autobiographical self-representation by women is evident. Second, the novel was published at a time when the avant-garde movement in literature was being replaced by socialist realism. The text was written before socialist realism took off, and therefore has a more informal and sincere quality. The autobiographical novel was a very attractive genre for describing a woman’s experience of war. Although autobiographical form and content have traditionally been regarded as characteristics of women’s literature and have been studied by literary scholars, these studies have not focused on women’s military narratives of the Russian Civil War.

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

In this article, my main focus is on the (gender) identity of the autobiographical heroine and the gender issues discussed in *The Fiery Path*. I am interested in answering the following questions: What was the author's position as a narrator and participant in war? How did she write about the influence of the war and ideological restrictions on her heroine? What kind of military femininities did Argutinskaia create? How did she work with the genre of autobiography? How did the writer introduce gender-based violence into her narrative?

There is an implicit feminist message in the novel, which liberates women from previous, restrictive gender frames and empowers them to seek new bases for and ways to form an identity. My research methodology utilizes approaches from feminist literary studies and the literary analysis of Russian texts written by women, most notably the works of Kirsti Ekonen on Symbolism (2011) and Irina Savkina on autobiography in the nineteenth century (2007). Although these researchers observe other periods of Russian women's literature, their works synthesize traditional historical and literary approaches with those of gender studies (including feminist theory, psychology, sociology, and history). I also apply traditional methods of philological analysis, especially comparative and typological approaches, since I place the women's images in the literary context of the period. The work of feminist scholars of autobiography, such as Susan Friedman (1988), Liz Stanley (1992), and Carolyn Heilbrun (1997), provides a tool for explaining why *The Fiery Path* has not been read and how it might be approached as women's writing.

My theoretical framework is determined by feminist understandings of gender and the concept of military femininities. Judith Butler, who offered the concept of gender performance, commented on the feminist perception of gender: "A feminist view argues that gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women" (*Gender Trouble* XIII). In Butler's revised understanding, gender is constructed at the intersection of how one person performs it and how others view it: "[O]ne does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another" (*Undoing Gender* 1). In this article, I seek to reconstruct gender representation on the front line, which appears in a variety of ways: "[I]t is perhaps more useful to think of femininity in the plural—femininities—and to see femininity both as an umbrella term for all the different ways in which women are defined by others and by themselves, and a semi-detached property of the self, not identical with the biologically sexed body" (Glover and Kaplan 4). Military femininities appear as a set of women's identities that break the gender binary: they are created on the margins of the accepted. One type of military femininity portrayed in *The Fiery Path* is similar to what Jack Halberstam calls "female masculinity." Its convergence and opposition to the archetypes of a warrior maiden (Zuseva-

Özkan) or an Amazon warrior (Mikhailova and Lipovetsky) help me formulate other military femininities that appear in the novel.

The gender perspective, significant for the narrator and her heroine, receives nuances in each part of this article. First, I introduce the novel in the literary context of the period, specifically showing its significance for women's writing. Second, I consider the question of class: Argutinskaia raises the issue of an educated, intellectual noblewoman becoming part of a collective, that is, an army composed of workers and peasants. Third, I consider the identities of women soldiers and the construction of military femininities. Finally, I discuss how the novel depicts women's experience of gender-based violence at the front.

Argutinskaia's Work in a Literary Context

Liusia Aleksandrovna Argutinskaia (1897–1968, née Elizaveta Aleksandrovna Argutinskaia-Dolgorukaia) was an Armenian princess, and the daughter of Prince Aleksandr M. Argutinsky-Dolgorukov, a *narodovolets*, or member of Narodnaia Volia, a late nineteenth-century revolutionary socialist political organization. She graduated from the Russian gymnasium (grammar school) in Tiflis, now Tbilisi, Georgia, and became a nurse on the front in the First World War in 1916. Argutinskaia participated in the Russian Civil War as a nurse, machine gunner, intelligence agent, and commissar, and was captured by White Guardsmen and sentenced to execution, but managed to escape. In the 1930s, she dedicated her books to the Russian Civil War. Argutinskaia later participated in the Second World War, serving as a war correspondent in the Winter War with Finland, and as a Captain of the Guard and literary employee of the *Krasnoarmeiskaia Zvezda* (*Red Army Star*) newspaper during the Great Patriotic War. These events likewise influenced her fictional writing, and war became the most fruitful theme in her work.

Argutinskaia's narratives about the Russian Civil War are usually centered on one heroine: in the late 1930s, she wrote short stories about participants in this conflict, such as Kseniia Ge and Tatiana Solomakha. Argutinskaia's last story was her most famous work. A partisan in the Second World War, Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia, was influenced by Argutinskaia's essay to assume the identity of Solomakha when interrogated by the Nazis. In *The Fiery Path*, Argutinskaia created an autobiographical character, Nina, a Red nurse who participated in the Russian Civil War. The autobiographical approach to this heroine is revealed by the fact that in her later memoirs, *Detskie gody v Tiflise* (*Childhood Years in Tiflis*, 2016), Argutinskaia again depicted an autobiographical heroine, giving her the name of her beloved sister Nina.

The Fiery Path appeared on the cusp of a change of literary movements in Soviet literature: the dawn of socialist realism. But while Argutinskaia herself was a member of a Soviet literary organization, LOCAF (Literary Association of the Red Army and Navy), where the principles of the new movement

were formulated (Zakruzhaia 53–54), the novel was not written in the new tradition. *The Fiery Path* is an autobiographical novel. The French researcher Philippe Lejeune considers the identity of the narrator and the protagonist as the genre-forming feature of autobiographical texts (Lejeune 14). A feature of non-fiction for him is an “autobiographical pact,” when a real person decides to tell their story truthfully and credibly. Argutinskaia does not claim that her fictional text is true in this way, but she creates a credible image of the war which allows her to show truth without fear of being accused of lying. As a genre, the autobiographical novel allows its author to distance herself from her real experience—which in the case of war can be quite traumatic—while the feminine “I” of the narrator gives Argutinskaia the opportunity to show a feminine perspective.

Argutinskaia’s choice to write an autobiographical novel, rather than an autobiography, may in part be because women did not have many models on which they could base the stories of their lives. Feminist researchers of autobiographies provide an explanation for this. In the early twentieth century, it was a taboo for women to describe their military experiences, and it was not until the 1970s that women’s stories of combat began to appear en masse (Capdevila 34). Carolyn Heilbrun notes that in the twentieth century, women were not able to show in their autobiographies “the claim of achievement, the admission of ambition, the recognition that accomplishment was neither luck nor the result of the efforts or generosity of others” (24).

Some women warriors’ lives were fictionalized, such as Nadezhda Durova’s *Kavalerist-devitsa: Proisshestvie v Rossii* (*The Cavalry Maiden: The Incident in Russia*, 1836). Unknown to Soviet readers, the life story of Mariia Bochkareva, a participant in the First World War, was told by her biographer Isaac Don Levine in *Yashka: My Life as Peasant, Officer and Exile* (1919). Yet there was no tradition of women participants in the Russian Civil War describing their own lives. The Stalinist age did not encourage women to do this: in the 1920s, highlighting the role of individuals in the war was not welcomed because it contradicted the spirit of revolutionary culture, which prioritized collectivist values over the narrative of exceptional individuals (Skubach 127). The turn to traditional androcentric values in the 1930s annihilated the historical importance of women in the war. As a publisher, Aleksei Maximovich [Maxim] Gorky tried to give a voice to unknown women participants of the civil war when he prepared the collection of their memories and short stories. Published after his death, the collection included three texts by Argutinskaia (Razgon). However, within the framework of heroization in the civil war, symbolic feminine figures were popularized instead of authentic testimonies: for instance, the Commissar in Vsevolod Vishnevskii’s play *Optimisticheskaia tragediia* (*Optimistic Tragedy*, 1932), or Anka Pulemetchitsa in the Vasilyev brothers’ film *Chapaev* (1934). The real voices of women remained marginalized, as did the works of women writers.

Despite the great tradition of artistic interpretation of the Russian Civil War in Soviet literature, the texts written by women—Sof'ia Fedorchenko, Larisa Reisner, Mariia Boretskaia, Anna Barkova, Mariia Levberg and some others—seem disproportionately few with respect to the total. Some of them better known, other less so, but none of these texts entered the Soviet literary canon on the civil war. Fedorchenko's three-volume *Narod na voine* (*People at War*, 1917–27), dedicated to the war of 1914–23 and the revolution, presented conversations with male soldiers from a multitude of perspectives. Yet, Volume 3 on the civil war appeared only in extracts in a journal, and the entire book was criticized and forgotten during the Soviet period. Reisner's *Front* (1918, 1924) was a series of essays on the civil war with almost no feminine perspective. Reisner became more recognized as a symbol of the revolution than as a writer describing it. In the early 1920s, Barkova became popular with her collection of poems *Zhenshchina* (*Woman*, 1922), in which she created the lyrical figure of the Red Army woman. However, Barkova was repressed numerous times in Stalin's purges and remained unknown during the later Soviet period. The Bolshevik writer Boretskaia's collection of short stories about the war, *V zheleznom krughe* (*In the Iron Circle*, 1924), was criticized by the literary functionary Dmitrii Furmanov. Her two novels on the same subject were published with a preface by one of the Party's main figures, Nadezhda Krupskaja, but remained unread by critics and the public. Levberg's collection of short stories *Na belom Severe* (*In the White North*, 1933), which describes the period of civil war in the Arkhangelsk region, also did not attract readers' or critics' attention. In addition, most of these texts did not attempt to convey a woman's vision of war, and they did not focus on images of women. The exceptions are Barkova's poems and Lidiia Seifullina's representations of revolutionary women in her stories, which were not based on autobiographical experiences. In this context of under-representation, this characteristic of Argutinskaia's works becomes even more important: her novel captures and reflects on a woman's autobiographical experience.

Soviet women writers of the period tended to falsify their real biographies, as did men, but men's biographies were restored by researchers after their deaths. Writers could not tell the truth about the pre-revolutionary and civil war periods due to the political requirements of the Stalin era when people were repressed because of their noble origins. So, establishing how the real feminine experience relates to its fictional image is rather difficult. While we need to consider (self-)censorship on different levels, this does not deny the significance of such works. The existing feminine view of war seems to have been lost; I claim this tradition needs to be restored and continued. This restoration is obviously relevant to the current war in Ukraine, in which women are again suffering at the hands of Russian soldiers. As a common aim of narratives about the past is to recover that past, the feminist sociologist Liz Stanley asks: "the past from *whose* viewpoint?" (7). Thus, the research prob-

lem of this article is to describe how women who participated in the civil war perceived that war. *The Fiery Path* was written by such a woman.

The Problem of Joining a Collective

The novel *The Fiery Path* had a pre-text, a story “Neizvestnye” (“The Unknown Persons,” 1921), published in the magazine *Kommunistka*. The story described two women participants in the war, who became characters in *The Fiery Path*—and in fact, almost the entire story was included in the novel. However, the changes Argutinskaia made when extending her story into a novel show how she was influenced by the ideological changes in the political situation. I analyze them below. The original novel *The Fiery Path* (1932) was republished and supplemented by Volumes 2 and 3 in 1933, and Volume 4 in 1937. In 1956, the second revised edition was published. Rather than focusing on the additions and revisions, in this article I concentrate on Volume 1, which problematized the heroine’s search for her military identity. The following parts were more descriptive: gender issues were still explored, but the class contradictions were resolved.

The Fiery Path is full of descriptions of battles and situations at the front and character storylines, but the central point is the heroine’s reflection on the breakdown of society around her. Thus, through the eyes of a heroine who is also the narrator (as in the famous Durova’s notes), one possible feminine vision of war is formed. In general, the melancholic reflexive mood of the narrator in *The Fiery Path* does not correspond to the military movement and to the tragic events that she describes. But although the heroine, Nina, mostly reflects on herself and her place in the war, her reflections are often represented by her psychophysiological characteristics rather than as declared judgments. For example, after learning that the Mensheviks raped a Georgian woman and shot her father, the narrator writes: “All night, without closing my eyes, I have been sitting on the porch” (Argutinskaia 107). Rather than directly reflecting on the incident, her only stated reaction is her inability to sleep.

Nina needs to choose a side in the conflict; she has to understand that the idea of the enemy in the civil war is different from that in a war with a foreign state. By building a narrative vector from the heroine’s epistemological uncertainty to her determination, Argutinskaia brings her text closer to the Bildungsroman that is, as Liz Stanley notes, an “autobiographical archetype [...] in which obstacles are overcome and the true self actualized or revealed” (11). I argue that Volume 1 of *The Fiery Path* shows how the woman forms herself to fit into the soldiers’ collective. Initially, the heroine is in a situation of ignorance or misunderstanding. The book begins with Nina’s reasoning about who the Bolsheviks are:

Once I asked a friend of mine:

—What is the difference between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks? Both are the Social Democrats...

—Mensheviks seek a minimum program, Bolsheviks seek a maximum program.

I didn't understand anything, but I didn't dare to ask further. It is necessary to find literature and sort out this issue myself. (Argutinskaia 6)

The writer describes how the nurses were bored with working on epidemics in the rear hospital and wanted instead to go to the front. They accidentally joined the Red Army due to a series of circumstances. For Nina, going to the front becomes a way to overcome loneliness and begin to serve the collective cause, as she explains: "Suddenly, I felt an unusually acute sense of loneliness and isolation from everyone. [...] Just the thought that I somehow lost touch with everyone, made me fear" (36). Showing the collective, or the masses, becomes the plot-forming idea of the book. While today the term "collective" means a way of consolidating or organizing people, and "masses" means the people themselves, Argutinskaia mostly uses the word "masses" in the context of civil war, where these two words appear synonymous.² Nina's task is to overcome isolation from the desired circle, to fit into the team. But to join the collective, one may well need to reject part of one's former identity—including ideas about morality, about good and evil. The complexity of this rejection is an obstacle for Nina, which she overcomes in the narrative. The transformation occurs not only to Nina, but also to the other nurses, her closest friends. The author shows that different women share Nina's difficulty with being a young woman at the front and shaping their own identity. When the nurses feel pity for a captured spy, they suggest not to shoot him:

—Gorev, why shoot?—I intervened.—After all, he's just a boy. Maybe he didn't even know what he was doing.

—You can arrest him, put him somewhere, —Belka put in.

Gorev frowned, his tone became unusually rude and harsh:

—That's what, girls, do not interfere in this matter and never contact me with such requests. This is not a dinner party, but a war. [...]

—I just feel sorry for him as a human. After all, no one wants to die young. It's really scary when you are being shot,—I said.—What if you give him poison? (Argutinskaia 53–54)

The commander advises the nurses to get rid of the love for all humankind, calling it "Tolstoian" (*tolstovshchina*). He explains to them the purpose of the struggle. They understand it in theory, but find it hard to go through with this shooting. The important idea introduced here is that the heroine perceives life through a literary perspective. Her view of the world is shaped by what she

2. This word choice corresponds to trends in the literature of the period: see Sofia Fedorchenko's *Narod na voine* (*People at War*, 1917), Aleksandr Serafimovich's *Zheleznyi potok* (*Iron Stream*, 1924), and Dmitrii Furmanov's *Chapaev* (1923). Soviet researchers have written a lot about this, e.g., Vladislav P. Skobelev, *Massa i lichnost' v russkoi sovetskoi proze 20-kh godov: K probleme narodnogo kharaktera*; Nina I. Velikaia, *Formirovanie khudozhestvennogo soznaniia v sovetskoi proze 20-kh godov*; and Mikhail V. Minokin, *Sovetskaia khudozhestvennaia proza 20-kh godov o grazhdanskoi voine*.

has read, for instance in gymnasium. The war and the army collective become an environment to get rid of illusions and get involved in brutal, military life.

At the Bolshevik headquarters, Nina tells the woman working there “about the officer who was shot, about the desire to give him poison, about the terror that tormented me and about the Mensheviks” (65). It is very difficult for Nina to accept the essence of the civil war. At some point, she rejoices that opponents are being shot, then wonders how it is possible to rejoice at the murder of people. Finally, she justifies herself by saying that they are enemies. Ethical guidelines become an internal obstacle for the heroine, preventing her from participating in the war in a cold-hearted way. Thus, her Bolshevik loyalty is formed by her overcoming inner ethical boundaries and accepting a black-and-white picture of military ethics. This approach corresponded to trends in the literature of the period, in which ethical assessments changed: “In this new system of spiritual and moral coordinates, ruthlessness occupies the place of honor that previously belonged to mercy” (Sheshunova 45).

Overstepping one’s own inner ethical norms and restrictions for the sake of merging with a collective was characteristic for both men and women who participated in the Russian Civil War, at least, when they were characters in women’s writing. For example, Mariia Boretskaia’s story “V zheleznom krugu” (“In the Iron Circle,” 1920) describes a male character: “He lived, hourly overcoming in himself a feeling of pity for people and hatred for murder by a harsh consciousness of necessity. And this struggle cost him a lot of blood” (Boretskaia 8).

Character formation in *The Fiery Path* corresponds to the process of constructing a new Soviet hero. The content of the concept of heroism is being rethought. One option for this transformation is when the hero changes, rejecting their values, joining the ranks, merging with the community and sacrificing their individuality. This leads to the erasure of their subjectivity: “The main and most important feature of the emerging Soviet plot is the reduction of human individuality imprinted in the hero” (Gudkova). In the 1920s, Nadezhda Krupskaja accented the need to change artistic focus from individuals to the masses: “We are interested not only in heroes, but rather in the crowd, and we need to know not what an individual demagnetized intellectual is going through, what this or that hero was going through, but it is important for us to know what the mass was going through” (Krupskaja 6).

Argutinskaia’s novel is different from other works. While many Soviet texts showed the results of this transformation, her novel concentrates on the process of this human change, enriched by the feminine gender of the protagonist. On the one hand, Argutinskaia depicts a version of an intellectual who joined the revolution. Such an image is typical for the literature of the 1920s and 1930s. One of the first examples was the image of Mechik in Aleksandr Fadeev’s novel *Razgrom* (*The Rout*, 1925–26), who was a “restless,

doubting, hesitating” character; when the old world collapsed overnight, he faced “a situation of moral, political choice of his path” (Chesnokova 199). The same need to rethink the attitude to the world, to renew the old foundations, and to be involved in current events takes possession of Nina: “Sometimes I think that I have only recently woken up. I walk and I don’t feel my feet under me. And how happy we are that we are living now!” (Argutinskaia 67). On the other hand, in the image of Nina, the problems of an intellectual are more specific because of her gender. Her character is formed in her search for a correlation between an acceptable social role for a woman and an adequate sense of self.

Identity at the Front: Military Femininities in the Collective

In *The Fiery Path*, the search for a suitable identity is the heroine’s main task. There are several types of identity that are important to the narrator, yet there seems to be no conflict in her ethnic identity. Take for instance this moment when Nina wants to go on a reconnaissance mission instead of her male comrade: “I’d rather go. I am Armenian: if there are Georgians, they’ll take me for their own, but they can chop you up” (Argutinskaia 23). Age is another sensitive marker of personality, and the heroine takes reaching adulthood positively: “Suddenly I remembered. I turned eighteen today. And on this day, the old life was gone, something was torn, left behind, and before me was something new, alluring and bright” (30). However, gender identity of women at the front is more ambiguous for the writer.

Nina seeks to construct her own military identity. She recalls how, under the influence of Leonid Andreev’s and Maxim Gorky’s books, she wanted to go to the Volga to help people. To do this, she put on a man’s suit and took the invented name Sasha Neznamov, but felt scared to leave her family. While her ideal was closer to that of the nineteenth-century *Narodniks*, whose main strategy was to enlighten the rural population, she could only imagine realizing it in masculine clothing under a masculine name. It was a performance of what Halberstam calls “female masculinity,” an identity that was uncomfortable for gender segregated societies: “[F]emale masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homonormative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach” (9). Since many women could not find feminine role models in war, they sought to perform military actions by taking on a masculine appearance. Adrienne Harris gives a later example of such literary behavior in the Second World War: “As a young girl, Liuba Shevtsova, a member of the Young Guard, dreamt of being Chapaev [...]: ‘she wanted to be Chapaev, not Anka the machine-gunner, due to her scorn for girls, but Chapaev’” (Harris 80). Men had more freedom, which girls like Liuba and Nina could only assume by “becoming men.”

I mentioned that two heroines of *The Fiery Path* appeared in the earlier story

“The Unknown Persons.” One of these two characters is Marusia, who became a military woman, for which she had to change her gender presentation:

He was dressed in a man’s suit, a soldier’s overcoat was thrown over his shoulders, a black *papakha* [traditional headdress] was casually held on the back of his head, and short blond hair was escaping from under it. A kit-bag lay on the side, a rifle leaned against a barrier.

— Well, why did you huddle together? What an incredible thing!— Suddenly a gruff female voice rang out.— You’d better tell me where the commander is? I’ll go to him, let him enlist me in the regiment.

Later I found out that she was enlisted in our regiment, her name was Marusia, but no one knew where she came from and why she came. (Argutinskaia 78)

The appearance of a woman soldier in the novel is unexpected, but description of military women like this was standardized in the works of the era. For instance, the vagueness of Marusia’s origin recalls the inscrutable appearance of another woman of the same name, anarchist Marusia in Boris Pilniak’s story “Ledokhod” (“Ice Drift,” 1924), “the one who got close, joined the detachment a week ago / a woman who came who knows [...] from where and how” (77, 97).

The figure of Marusia becomes disturbing for Nina, so she tries to find out who she is by asking the fighters a question: “— Oh, what a wild girl! — said one of them. — She’s from the village. She’s been living with us for three weeks, but if you ask her why she came, she will only make a joke about it” (Argutinskaia 115). This moment is typologically parallel to the behavior of Lel’ka, the *atamansha* (female leader of a squad) in Boris Lavrenev’s novel *Veter* (*Wind*, 1924), whose origin is stated as follows: “A woman came; the devil knows what; from where, the devil knows” (29). Like Marusia, Lel’ka answers all questions about her personality with jokes and proverbs, laughing at the questioner. The fighting woman seems to have no biography because her past does not correlate with the present, masculine role of a fighter. Reticence, substitution of serious conversation with irony, and intractability become characteristics of the fictional image of a woman combatant in the Russian Civil War. A number of details characterizing Marusia—wildness (“wild girl”), masculinity (“she smoked a twist, spat aside like a man”), and courage (“In battle she is like a man, fear does not take her!”)—fit the archetype of a warrior maiden (Zuseva-Özkan). Despite the fact that numerous women fought in the Soviet wars, the woman warrior did not gain traction: “[D]ue to its openly anti-patriarchal character, the archetype of the Amazon warrior did not find its way into Soviet culture. [...] the active participation of women in military actions was frequently seen as an unacceptable gender transgression, taking a woman beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ social relations” (Mikhailova and Lipovetsky 83–84).

Argutinskaia’s narrator’s view of the character who breaks down the boundaries between masculine and feminine is similar to the view of protagonists written by men. But even if Nina worries about this woman fighter, she

never judges her negatively. On the battlefield, only one detail may indicate that Marusia is a woman: “The *papakha* was lying nearby, wavy hair scattered down her neck and fell in curls on her forehead” (Argutinskaia 123). In general, the image of the heroine in her appearance, character, and actions tends toward the masculinity paradigm, but knowledge about her gender prevents others from accepting the fighter in her. Similarly, Nina seems surprised that the woman is a soldier. Although, as an adolescent, she herself wanted to play a masculine social role, the appearance of this “masculine woman” turns out to be too imposing for her. Halberstam’s words that “female masculinity” is “an emblem of social upheaval” and “marker of sexual disorder” are relevant for Marusia: “She wears the wrong clothes, expresses aberrant desires and is very often associated with clear markers of a distinctly phallic power. She may carry a gun, smoke a cigar, wear leather” (Halberstam 186).

Marusia’s type of “female masculinity” threatens the patriarchal gender order, so Nina does not adopt it, although she feels restricted by the traditional social feminine role. Her work as a Red nurse becomes a way of resolving this tension in her identity. Women found a way to escape the gender restrictions at the front by taking on the role of Red nurse. During the Russian Civil War, nurses not only took care of the wounded but also took part in the fighting. In this way, they destroyed the feminine/masculine binary, and *expanded* the idea of femininity: “‘masculine’ valor and militancy were added to the traditional ‘feminine’ virtues such as consolation, care, inspiration. Such *expanded* femininity in the Russian Civil War became the norm for many of its female participants” (Simonova 188).

Nina notices and overcomes the weakness of character attributed to women: in contrast to the excitement of her friend, whom the commander asks not to behave like a peasant woman (*baba*): “I don’t like tears and squeaking” (Argutinskaia 73),—the narrator, not without pride, reports her bravery. She puts this assessment into other characters’ mouths: for example, commander Perlin takes Nina on a reconnaissance mission in order to brag that his nurse is “reckless” (93). Later, when she stands up for an old woman who is being bullied by a security officer, the others suggest that her words should be listened to because “this is a nurse from the front. She’s a combatant one” (192). During the narrative, Nina’s role gradually expands. The range of her duties increases because Red nurses serve directly on the battlefield. Nina helps to fix the telephone connection, later helps a machine gunner, and after his death, she operates the machine gun herself. All these military functions were usually performed only by men. Finding an acceptable feminine form of participation in the war becomes one of the heroine’s internal tasks. While she is not ready to take on Marusia’s “female masculinity,” she is ready to embrace the Red nurse’s *expanded* femininity.

Red nurses are not the only women to challenge gender roles in the war. In a sanatorium, Nina meets a machine gunner girl who again violates her gen-

der expectations. While Marusia did so by her masculine appearance, the machine gunner surprises Nina with the contrast between her girlish, childish physical appearance and her participation in the hostilities:

I looked at her carefully.

A girl... a teenager. Big gray eyes, fringed with thick eyelashes and a long curly braid.

There was so much that was fragile and tender in the outlines of her face, in her slender figure, that it was hard to believe that she, too, was at the front, took part in all the horrors of the war. (Argutinskaia 161)

The machine gunner girl is also a character in the story “The Unknown Persons.” This feminine type of participant, the fragile girl, often appeared in fictional texts about the war: for example, Mariutka in Lavrenev’s *Sorok pervyi* (*Forty-first*, 1924) or Olga Zotova in Aleksei Tolstoy’s *Gadiuka* (*The Viper*, 1928). The writers portray this girlish femininity as excluding childbearing and intimate relationships. In contrast to their expression in adult women, masculine qualities are less threatening when a youthful girl displays them. Her girlish attractiveness allows her to be a positive character in works by men, who aimed to show the inappropriateness of women on the front:

Mariutka is thin, a coastal reed, braids her red braids with a wreath under the brown Teke *papakha* [Teke people’s headdress]. (Lavrenev, *Sorok pervyi* 6)

There were iron forces hidden in the weak girl—it was unclear where it came from. [...] Zotova, thin and tall, with a dark, well-shaped cap of hair, in a short sheepskin coat tightly tied with a belt, jingling with spurs, passed through the low-grade tobacco smoke of the barracks. [...] her shoulders were girlish. (Tolstoy 15–16)

Argutinskaia’s machine gunner girl, overcoming her own grief (at the loss of loved ones and home), joins the Red Army. She writes her individual tragedy into the general suffering: “Many in the city were chopped up, hanged” (Argutinskaia 161). In a combat situation, she seems to lose her human orientation and identity. These internal supports are replaced by belonging to something greater (the victory cause) and unity with fellow soldiers:

—It was creepy at first at the machine gun, the first time. Nevertheless, I was killing people... And then nothing, it passed... As a fight begins, you don’t remember anything, you just aim and shoot... I was wounded a second time, but I couldn’t leave there.

I looked at her and did not recognize her as a girl, fragile and weak, as she looked recently. Her eyes were burning with some kind of inner big fire.

—And to win, we will win! I know this for sure. [...] It can’t be otherwise. (161)

The machine gunner girl “somehow tried to obscure herself, but her brave, rebellious and strong soul was involuntarily felt, it was all eager to fight” (162). This machine gunner already fits into the team. An external look at her returns individuality to this heroine. But the femininity that the narrator attributes to the machine gunner is overcome by the machine gunner’s own view. In her mind, she is part of the collective whose gender characteristics are not indicated. The questions of collective and gender identity are applied to female characters in the novel, showing their importance to the narrator.

In the earlier story, "The Unknown Persons," the last sentence ended differently: "And to win, we will win! I know that for sure. If we have to die, we'll die in peace" (Argutinskaia, "Neizvestnye" 26). The idea of death, associated with the revolutionaries and participants in the civil war in the early 1920s, disappeared in the 1930s, giving way to a triumphal image of war. The final statement of the story was even more remarkable: "[H]undreds and thousands of people like them who gave up their personal lives, proudly and boldly going to death and giving their lives for the people's cause. And the eternal memory of them and of their comrades who lived with them" (27). This finale corresponded to the spirit of the revolutionary style of the 1920s. The mass character of the participation in the war was emphasized, and the main idea was that the hero would die (Otdel rabotnits TsK RKP (b) 1923).

Yet, the idea of joining a collective appears ambivalently through the prism of gender. The shared identity of the Red nurses could be seen as a normative women's worldview, but the goal of being equal to soldiers who were men led to the rejection of anything "feminine" at the front, such as love and sexuality. Some researchers see group gender identity as characteristic of women's autobiographical narratives (Friedman 40; Savkina, "Svoia sredi chuzhikh" 141). This shared identity is typical of the self-perceptions of Red nurses in memoir texts: the collective "we" emerges when a memoirist associates herself with like-minded people (Simonova 191). A kind of collective experience was formed, which, through the narrator's "we," was presented as objective. Moreover, Marianne Liljeström argues that "in testimonial texts individuality is presented as an identity which is formed as a continuation of the collective" (82).

For Argutinskaia's heroine Nina, merging her personality with the military collective and maintaining Bolshevik loyalty turn out to be impossible in the beginning, despite her closeness to other nurses. When Nina falls ill with typhoid fever, she feels separate from the masses. Although she is cared for by a soldier who takes her out to a field to relieve herself, Nina resents her friends, the Red nurses, who do not realize the severity of her illness. A case in the hospital helps her to side finally with the masses: when a woman doctor talks about the (lack of) culture of tramps and officers, Nina firmly stands up to her, and states that she is already a Bolshevik. The "White" doctors' opposition to the nurses' impulse to aid the Bolsheviks is mentioned more than once in the book. Nina overcomes her alienation from the masses at a funeral for some killed fighters: "Belka looked into my eyes, and her face seemed to me an extraordinary, new, face of a person who dissolved into the mass, gave everything, forgot about themselves and their little personal experiences" (Argutinskaia 138).

The idea of the collective is opposed to the patriarchal system, which centered around the father figure. Nina feels compassion for her father; but if her loved ones joined the "Whites," she would break with them. The idea of a mass, a fraternal collective of equals, replaces the previous hierarchical idea

of a family. Nina wants to join a collective that is not gender based, but in Soviet fiction and reality, the Russian Civil War was a masculine world where the roles of women were secondary (Borenstein 3). The collective that replaced the traditional family was fraternal and did not recognize women as its equal members. Military men saw the women among them as threatening their idea of the collective. Anti-collectivist tendencies manifest in the novel through women intervening in the soldiers' lives, mostly through sexual relations. In one scene, a woman is trying to deal with the mistress of her husband, commander Zelenskii, whom he passed off as a Red nurse. The commander kills his wife. Nina hides her attitude to the crime, replacing it with the collective opinion that claims to be objective. In a letter to Argutinskaia, Gorky, under his real name Peshkov, draws attention to her narrator's refusal to judge:

The advantages of your work include the fact that although you write in the "first person," your "I" does not really come out in the foreground. This means that you respect your material and that your consciousness of equality with people is sincere, that the historical significance of your heroes, your comrades-in-arms, is well understood by you. [...]

To your credit: Zelenskii shot his wife—it's a bad thing! You, woman, hid your indignation at this murder by showing how it was condemned by other comrades. That's right. Another man or another woman in your place would surely sprinkle a lot of unnecessary and empty words on this fact.

[...] I am very pleased that women are gradually entering literature. There are not enough of them yet, but they are already noticeable. (Peshkov 68)

Argutinskaia refuses the prevailing role of the narrator, allowing the characters to speak out. Putting an assessment into the mouths of different characters, she visibly gives the floor to the collective. Thus, the "I" of the heroine is giving way to the "they" of the other personages which finally becomes a collective "we." For Gorky, this transformation was not only in the text but also in life: lone feminine voices should be substituted by the community of women.

Importantly, Argutinskaia's Volume 1 of the novel is quite unusual for fictional texts about women at the front of the Civil War due to the absence of a love conflict. The plots of male-authored texts with a protagonist who is a woman participant in the Russian Civil War—Lavrenev's *Forty-first* and *Wind*, Tolstoy's *The Viper*, and Pilniak's "Ice Drift," or plays such as Lavrenev's "Razlom" ("Fracture," 1928) and Konstantin Trenev's "Liubov' Iarovaia" (1926)—are usually based on a love conflict. As Simone de Beauvoir notes, "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him" (5). Typically in these texts by men, the positive heroine is involved in a relationship with a hero: the woman appears as an object of sexual desire for a military man. In contrast, in known testimonies by women (Durova and Bochkareva), love did not become a part of the heroine's military destiny. Women's military autobiographies tend not to emphasize their feminine gender but describe

how the protagonist overcomes it. For instance, Durova's text is written as the military memories of a nobleman, as Hilde Hoogenboom has demonstrated. Such refusal of gender markers resonates with the aim of feminist scholars to overcome gender. Like the protagonists of military women's autobiographies, Argutinskaia's heroine also refuses to identify herself through relations with men. Although Nina's love interest appears at the beginning of the novel, their relations do not become its focus. However, the absence of a love conflict at the center of the plot brings Argutinskaia's narrative closer to the texts in which the intellectual protagonist is a man. In other words, while the narrator creates different military femininities, their common feature is the rejection of intimate relationships with men as a condition for joining the masculine collective on (quasi) equal terms.

Gender-based Violence in the War

Besides consideration of gender roles and identities, a focus on gender-based violence characterizes *The Fiery Path*. Nina settles in a hotel, where her room is invaded at night; having almost been subjected to violence, she flees. The novelist also describes the attempted rape of the nurse Belka by Red Army soldiers who did not know her (Argutinskaia 140).

The novel gives evidence of the military men's lack of concern about gender-based violence. On a reconnaissance mission, Nina hears a woman being raped in a house and calls commander Perlin to help the woman, but he does not risk it: "She is being raped! What a misfortune! What will she lose? Don't pull me! I'm not going, I told you. I still value my life" (94). That evening Perlin himself harasses Nina and is rebuffed. Although Perlin turns out to be a negative character, his attitude confirms the fact established by researchers that in war, women's bodies are extremely objectified: "Sexual violence against women during a period of war and ethnic or religious conflicts is regarded as quite legitimate, [...] a woman is completely deprived of her human status for both the rapist and the defender of national or ethnic pride" (Tlostanova 94). In war, the woman is reduced to a body belonging to the winner. Such an image of women and their bodies is typical for a patriarchal culture: "[R]epresentations of bodies of allegorical female figures had one characteristic in common. They were solely images of women suffering violence; the body's potential as a site of resistance was not employed. Simultaneously, the expectation of a rescuing male figure was emphasized" (Eremeeva 733). Such a suffering woman was a dependent woman waiting for her savior and protector.

The opposite type is represented by resisting women, who have appropriated "masculine" qualities within the framework of military femininities. But any manifestations of women's subjectivity are severely punished by military men. In the novel, women are even murdered for this: Marusia, whose body Nina sees; and her friend Belka, whose murder Nina is told about. The

women were killed with extreme cruelty, wounded and then mutilated with bayonets. The heroine sees a body covered with a greatcoat:

It was Marusia.

Her face, which had recently been cheerful and merry, was covered in dried blood, one eye was knocked out and her nose was broken with a saber. A mournful smile froze on her face.

A man wounded in the arm and already bandaged told in a crying, trembling voice:

—They jumped on us from the flank. I was the furthest one... I was wounded, I got into the bushes and leaned... I looked, Marusia was up and fired at them. And suddenly she fell... rolled... And from behind the trees, two officers and soldiers appeared... Marusia noticed them... twice she tried to get up... she kept falling... And then she got up a little and fired. The officer rolled. Then they attacked her... they beat her with butts... they stabbed her all over with bayonets...

He stopped talking and large tears rolled down his face. (Argutinskaia 131)

The tragedy of Belka's murder is even more terrible because the nurse was not shooting during the battle, but was bandaging a wounded soldier. Gorev sees her body: "She was so disfigured—horror! First wounded by a bullet, then stabbed with bayonets and beheaded with a saber" (153).

At the end of Volume 1 of *The Fiery Path*, the nurses, still exhausted after a harsh life at the front and illness, leave for a new regiment. Apparently, this neglect of her own body for the sake of the collective can be considered a metaphor for Nina's eventual merger with the masses. Her body has not yet recovered but she does not think about it, providing it to the team fighting for a just cause.

Conclusion

War is a significant and productive topic in Argutinskaia's works. Yet, her autobiographical novel *The Fiery Path*, although reprinted, rarely came to the attention of literary critics and was not included in the canon of Soviet literature about the Russian Civil War. The novel is highly interesting literary and historical material as a fictionalized testimony to the brutal, gendered material realities of the war. It depicts the transgressive practices of a woman who witnesses, reflects on, resists, but also participates in various forms of physical and symbolic violence among the "masses" led by men. One key issue on which the heroine reflects is the gender identity of an intellectual communicating with the masses.

The heroine faces three problems: joining the collective, self-realization as a Red nurse, and being a woman at the front. To resolve these issues, Nina has to overcome her literature-centered worldview and get involved in real army life, which contradicts with her ethics. In her novel, Argutinskaia not only considers the ethical norms originating from literature, culture, and intellectuals' principles that are seen to apply regardless of gender, but also the challenges specific to women. The women at the front are searching for a gender identity that expands understandings of femininity by combining the roles of a woman and a fighter. A number of different military femininities are pre-

sented in the novel: the “female masculinity” of a woman soldier, the military femininity of a young girl soldier, and the *expanded* femininity of the Red nurses. Argutinskaia’s experience of combat in the Russian Civil War gave her a deeper understanding of women’s role at the front. The narrator’s evaluation of what she experiences and the elimination of her “I” that is characteristic for the novel’s style, create linguistic prerequisites for the heroine to abandon her patriarchal, intellectual family to fit into the collective military fraternity with the masses.

Thus, the novel not only conveys “universal” military experience, which in fact is a male one, but also specifies the experience of women in war. Gender shapes relations on the front line, where women and girls are subject to military and to sexual violence. In addition to the rejection of violence, which Nina shared with other intellectuals, both men and women, the heroine-narrator is sensitive to gender-based violence, which remains a blind spot for her male colleagues.

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes Argutinskaia's novel *Ognennyi put'* (*The Fiery Path*, 1932). The significance of this text lies in its autobiographical heroine, a participant in the Russian Civil War, and its focus on the issues faced by women at the front, which is relatively uncommon in the literature on this war. Utilizing feminist literary studies and traditional philological analysis, the research explores how Argutinskaia's narrative liberates women from restrictive gender roles and empowers them to construct new identities. A number of different military femininities are presented in the novel: the "female masculinity" of a woman soldier, the military femininity of a young girl soldier, and the *expanded* femininity of the Red nurses. As a participant in this civil war, the author opts for the genre of the autobiographical novel rather than the traditional autobiography. This choice can be attributed to the hardships she experienced and the lack of available models on which to base such an unconventional experience. The novel centers on the heroine's reflection on the breakdown of the usual foundations of society. While in this respect Argutinskaia's work is close to the literature of the 1920s and 1930s that depicts a typical intellectual who joined the revolution, the feminine gender of her protagonist provides an unusual perspective. The issue of gender-based violence in warfare, as depicted in the novel, is emphasized in this article. By situating the work within the broader literary context of its time, this article aims to shed light on the significance of women's military narratives and the need for their recognition in literary discourse.