

Author's Note for

The Huntress

By Kate Quinn

The Soviet Union was the only nation involved in the Second World War to put women in the sky as fighter and bomber pilots. Primarily women in their late teens and early twenties, they were products of the Soviet aviation drive of the 1930s, and they were championed by Marina Raskova, the Amelia Earhart of the USSR, who unabashedly used Stalin's favor to get three all-female regiments funded and trained. The day bombers and the fighter pilots (among the latter, Lilia Litviak, seen in cameo at the Engels training camp, was killed in an aerial dogfight during the war, but became history's first female ace) eventually integrated with male personnel. The night bombers remained all-female throughout their entire term of service and were fiercely proud of this fact.

The ladies of the Forty-Sixth "Taman" Guards Night Bomber Aviation Regiment went to war in the outdated Polikarpov U-2, an open-cockpit cloth-and-plywood biplane, achingly slow and highly flammable, built without radio, parachute, or brakes. (It was redesignated the Po-2 after 1943; I was unable to pinpoint an exact date for the change, and so continued to use the term U-2 for clarity.) The women flew winter and summer, anywhere from five to eighteen runs per night, relying on stimulants that destroyed their ability to rest once off-duty. They flew continuously under these conditions for three years, surviving on catnaps and camaraderie, developing the conveyor belt land-and-refuel routine that gave them a far more efficient record than comparable night bomber regiments. The women's relentless efficiency in pushing the maximum number of bombing runs every night waged ruthless psychological warfare on the Germans below, who thought their silent glide-down sounded like witches on broomsticks, and gave them the nickname "the night witches." Such dedication took a toll: the regiment lost approximately 27 percent of its flying personnel to crashes and enemy fire. The Night Witches were also awarded a disproportionately higher percentage of Hero of the Soviet Union medals—the USSR's highest decoration.

Nina Markova is fictional, but almost every one of her exploits in the regiment was taken from life. Lieutenant Serafima Amosova-Taranenko was born in remote Siberia, saw a Pe-5 perform a forced landing and swore to become a pilot. Senior Lieutenant Yevgeniya Zhigulenko finagled her way into the training group by telephoning a random colonel in the aviation department until he gave her an appointment, then refusing to leave—in exasperation he referred her to Raskova, and she was accepted. Navigator Irina Kashirina successfully made a one-armed landing, taking the stick with one hand while holding her wounded pilot off the front-cockpit controls with the other. Captain Larisa Litvinova-Rozanova described the experience of pilot and navigator trading naps to and from the target, and the horror of watching three planes before her and one plane behind her shot down by a night fighter (the regiment's worst night of losses) as she escaped by flying low. Major Mariya Smirnova had the experience of being pushed out over the Sea of Azov

and battling wind and cloud cover to avoid crashing into the sea. Many of Nina's other experiences are recounted by multiple women: the necessity of climbing out on a wing mid-flight to knock off a bomb stuck on the rack, being chased down by pursuing German planes, singing and dancing and embroidering during airfield waits, hazing from the male pilots, and the indignity of wearing mass-issued men's underwear.

Yelena is also a fictional character; it is not known if there were any romantic relationships between women of the Forty-Sixth. In the oppression of the Soviet Union, no one would have spoken a word of any such liaison had it existed. Pilot memoirs and interviews are similarly close-lipped about criticism of the ruling regime—even after the fall of the Soviet Union, only one Night Witch openly admitted hating Stalin and his rule. Undoubtedly there were others who were less than ardent Communists even as they fought to defend their homeland, but like Nina, they would have remembered the listening ears of the secret police and kept quiet. There is no record that any woman of the Forty-Sixth defected on a bombing run before she could be arrested—but the Red Air Force was clearly afraid such things could happen, since they made a point of refusing posthumous honors to any deceased pilot whose body was not recovered. Soviet superiors were clearly aware of the danger that some resourceful pilot might take his or her plane in the opposite direction to find a new life in the West.

Poland, where Nina crashes in August 1944, would have been a hellish place to survive. The doomed Warsaw rebellion was in full roar, the Soviet army pushing from the east as Nazis began to flee west. Poznań, renamed Posen by the Germans, was a place steeped in tragedy: many Polish citizens were displaced, arrested, and executed as German settlers moved in to make a new Aryan province. Lake Rusalka was created using Polish slave labor, and though there was no Huntress living in an ocher-walled mansion on its shores, the lake was the site of several massacres. Memorials to the dead stand today in silent witness among the trees around an otherwise beautiful nature spot. Poznań was also the site of a prisoner of war camp, Stalag XXI-D, home to many Allied prisoners sitting out the war in idle frustration. Many had been captured during the retreat to Dunkirk, including members of the Sixth Battalion Royal West Kents in whose ranks I placed the fictional Sebastian Graham, and escape attempts from behind stalag walls were common. Most escapees were recaptured or killed, but at least one man—Allan Wolfe, referenced by Sebastian—walked to Czechoslovakia and managed to survive living rough in the countryside until the war's end, so survival in the wild was possible, if difficult.

The pretty spa town of Altaussee was a bolt-hole for any number of high-ranking Nazi officials in the war's immediate aftermath, including Adolf Eichmann. His wife continued to live at 8 Fischerndorf with their sons—in 1952, a few years after her fictional interview with Ian and his team in this book, the real Vera Eichmann would quietly pack up her children and go to join her husband in exile. Had anyone been keeping watch on her, Eichmann would likely have been caught years before his eventual capture in 1960, but resources were too thin stretched for even the most dedicated of war crimes investigation teams to maintain permanent surveillance on targets of interest.

Most of the men and women who devoted their lives to hunting down war criminals despised the term “Nazi hunter” because it conjured a vision of pulse-pounding Hollywood adventure, and the reality was very different. The first war crimes investigation teams began in the immediate

aftermath of World War II, taking testimony from camp survivors and liberators, tracking the guilty down in POW camps and escape bolt-holes, seeking out the civilian murderers of downed Allied airmen and escaped POWs as well as the perpetrators of the Final Solution. Men like William Denson, US Army chief prosecutor at the Dachau trials, and Benjamin Ferencz, chief prosecutor in the trial of the Einsatzgruppen killers, were responsible for prosecuting and convicting hundreds. But after the Nuremberg Trials there was an overwhelming public sense of *well, now that's done* as far as Third Reich war criminals were concerned: only a tiny percentage of the guilty had been tried, but war exhaustion and a rising fear that the Soviet Union was the new enemy rather than the defunct Third Reich both contributed to the lack of interest in further war crimes trials. By the seventies and eighties, as the Cold War waned and the realization arose that time was running out as WWII veterans and witnesses aged, there was renewed interest in seeing Nazi war criminals brought to justice, but post-Nuremberg investigation teams faced an uphill battle.

Some of these investigations were government funded, some were run through refugee documentation centers like those begun by Tuviah Friedman in Vienna and Simon Wiesenthal in Linz, and some were conducted privately; there was no common strategy or agreement on tactics, and such groups often disagreed with one other. Investigation teams were perpetually underfunded and overextended. Apprehending a war criminal usually involved tedious cross-checking of records, nearly impossible efforts to identify suspects with nothing more than old photographs and outdated witness testimony, wary interviews with a suspect's neighbors or family who had no reason or legal obligation to cooperate, and long hours following a suspect's friends and acquaintances. Much depended on bribery, charm, guile—and patience, because most hunts took months or years.

Once a war criminal was apprehended, there was no guarantee they could be brought to trial: in Europe, many former Nazis still held positions of power in law enforcement and government, and war crimes trials were stymied by indifference, bribery, even death threats. Pursuing criminals who had fled overseas was even more difficult. An overseas hunt might end in a years-long legal battle to get a criminal deported, a kidnapping job to circumvent extradition (Mossad's black-bag snatch of Adolf Eichmann, bringing him from Argentina to Israel where he was tried and executed), or an assassination (the straightforward killing of Herberts Cukurs, called "the Eichmann of Latvia," in Brazil).

Ian and Nina Graham are fictional Nazi hunters, though they were inspired in part by the famous husband and wife team Serge and Beate Klarsfeld, whose partnership is both a moving postwar romance and an inspiring dedication to human justice—their most famous catch was Klaus Barbie "the Butcher of Lyon," and though in their eighties now they are still tirelessly dedicated to the fight against fascism. Tony Rodomovsky is likewise fictional, as is his Boston refugee center and Ian's Vienna-based one, though such centers were invaluable not only for helping bring war criminals to justice, but in documenting the testimony of Holocaust survivors. Without such repositories working to preserve witness statements and camp evidence, much information about Nazi atrocities would have been lost. Fritz Bauer, on the other hand, was a very real man: a Jewish refugee who returned to his homeland postwar and tirelessly prosecuted war criminals despite hostility from a West German government that wanted to forget its past crimes. Times have changed since those days, and in a modern Germany that has very much taken

responsibility for its horrendous history, Fritz Bauer is now remembered as one of the first Nazi hunters.

There were definitely German war criminals living in America after the war. In 1973, Democratic Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman inquired in a routine subcommittee hearing whether the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) knew of any Nazi war criminals living in the United States, and the answer was unhesitating: “Yes. Fifty-three.” There was a list; there was simply no organization, funding, or interest in investigating the names on it. Holtzman later pushed for the creation of the Justice Department’s Office of Special Investigations, but before the OSI, any Nazi war criminal who made it to the United States had a good chance of living in peace...including one woman upon whom I based *die Jägerin*.

Hermine Braunsteiner was a brutal female camp guard at Ravensbrück and Majdanek. Postwar, she served a brief prison sentence in Europe, then upon release married an American she met on holiday in Austria. She became a US citizen living quietly in Queens, New York, and her neighbors were dumbfounded when she was tracked down in 1964 and accused of war crimes. The woman whom her astonished husband insisted “wouldn’t hurt a fly!” became the first Nazi war criminal to be extradited from the United States. Anneliese Weber/Lorelei Vogt is a fictional composite of Hermine Braunsteiner and another female war criminal, Erna Petri, who as an SS officer’s wife during the war found six escaped Jewish children near her home in Ukraine, brought them home to feed them a meal, then shot them. She was tried in 1962, and given a life sentence.

After long hours researching both women, I am still at an utter loss to understand why they committed the crimes they did. Erna Petri was defensive, admitting her crime was reprehensible but justifying that she had been conditioned to Nazi racial laws against Jews and hardened by living among SS men who carried out frequent executions—she said she wanted to show she could conduct herself like a man. Hermine Braunsteiner was self-pitying, weeping, “I was punished enough.” Both women faced justice, but only after a long slog of legalities and paperwork: it took seven years for Braunsteiner’s citizenship to be stripped, another two years before she was extradited to Germany, and a further eight years before she was sentenced to life in prison. Since I wanted *The Huntress* to have a swifter climax than a seventeen-year legal battle, and even more because I did not wish to have my fictional characters take credit from the very real journalists, investigators, and legal teams who brought Erna Petri and Hermine Braunsteiner to justice, I made the decision to create a fictional female war criminal from Braunsteiner's and Petri’s records.

As always, I have taken some liberties with the historical record to serve the story. I wasn’t able to confirm if there was an air club at Irkutsk, though there were hundreds of air clubs across the USSR by the time Nina learned to fly. It isn’t known if representatives from the female aviation regiments were present at Marina Raskova’s funeral in Red Square, or if Stalin himself was there—but given the deep affection in which both the “Boss” and the women pilots held Raskova, it seems likely. (Besides, I couldn’t resist the opportunity of showing Stalin in a cameo, along with his very-real habit of doodling wolves on documents!) The occasion where the Night Witches had to scramble their planes into the sky when they had just sat down to breakfast happened in the Crimea rather than in Poland and is combined with a separate occasion

recounted by Lieutenant Polina Gelman, who recalls getting extremely tipsy after an unaccustomed drink at a holiday dinner, then flying a bombing run completely hammered. Readers may also find conflicting versions of Russian names, since translating from Cyrillic to English results in unstandardized spelling variations.

Ian Graham is fictional, and so is his presence as a war correspondent at historic events such as Omaha Beach and the Nuremberg executions. He is based on several journalists like Ernie Pyle, Richard Dimbleby, and war photographer Robert Capa who spent the war jumping between the front line's hottest danger zones in search of the news. Such men might not have been soldiers, but they risked their lives parachute-jumping from bombers, running with guerrilla troops, and wading onto the beaches of Normandy armed with nothing but notepads and cameras. Their bravery was astonishing, and after the war many suffered as badly from PTSD as any soldier—often more so, considering that a journalist could hop from front line to front line, whereas a soldier bound to a single regiment might experience much less combat. Among the male war correspondents and photographers were some truly heroic women as well, including Jordan McBride's heroes Margaret Bourke-White (star photographer of *LIFE* magazine), and Gerda Taro (the first female photographer to cover a war zone). Jordan is fictional, but her heroines are not, and deserve to be remembered.

The SS Conte Biancamano which brings Ian and his team to the United States was a real passenger liner running the Genoa-Naples-Cannes-New York route, but exact sailing dates have been adjusted for the story. Eve Gardiner, Ian's acquaintance from British Intelligence with whom he shares a drink on that voyage, might be recognizable to some who have read my novel *The Alice Network*. Ruby Sutton and her newspaper column, which Eve quotes during the Blitz, comes from Jennifer Robson's *Goodnight From London*, with permission of the author who was on tour with me at the time of writing.

Finally, a word about lakes and lake spirits. There is no Selkie Lake in western Massachusetts, but Altaussee, Lake Rusalka, and Lake Baikal are all very real. This story began for me with the idea of lakes, the water nymphs rumored to inhabit them (some benevolent and some malevolent, depending on the folklore), and the three very different women who begin this story standing on vastly distant shores. It would take the tides of war plus one determined Englishman and his Jewish-American partner to find the connections between these women, and it leads them on perhaps a more pulse-pounding adventure than real Nazi hunters usually faced. But that's how the muse gave me the story, and I rarely argue with the muse. (Because I always lose.)

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