



FIG. 25. *Nadezhda Popova 803*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 58¼ x 59 x 2 inches; 2015.

### ***Nadezhda Popova (1921–2013)***

As one of the first female military pilots in the Soviet Union, Popova was highly decorated with awards including the title “Hero of the Soviet Union,” the Gold Star Medal, the Order of Lenin, and three Orders of the Red Star. Born: Soviet Union. During Holocaust: Soviet Union.

NADEZHDA POPOVA

## *Hero of the Soviet Union*

Molly Merryman

**N**achthexen: A word that struck fear into the German invaders, who, as Nadezhda Popova said, came “like a terrible storm had invaded our country.”<sup>1</sup> Nachthexen: Night witches. A term these women pilots initially disliked; a term they stopped hating when they understood the terror it represented in the minds and bodies of their invading enemy.

Nadezhda Popova was one the most decorated combat pilots of World War II, and she was a celebrated hero of her country, the Soviet Union. She was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union, Gold Star, Order of Lenin and three times the Order of the Red Star.<sup>2</sup> Nadezhda’s war was not a war of distant battles fought for liberty, justice and freedom. This was a bloodletting of brutal and epic proportions: millions of square miles of land viciously shredded as the German military pushed in as far as Stalingrad and Leningrad before being forced back, at least 20 million Soviets slaughtered or starved to death, tens of millions of Soviet prisoners of war and Jewish citizens deported to Nazi death camps, untold millions of girls and women raped, and countless numbers of homes, farms, factories and businesses destroyed by the wrath of war.

War was no abstraction to Nadezhda Popova or to her family. Her brother Leonid was killed in battle during the early days of the invasion. She wanted to avenge his death and sent a telegram to Moscow asking to be sent to the front, as she already was a trained pilot. This was not to be her only personal loss: The advancing Germans pushed into the Ukraine and occupied her village. She recounted later that her family home “became the fascist police office. They destroyed the apricot trees and the flowers and used our garage to torture our people.”<sup>3</sup>

Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, was even more brutal than Germany’s conquests of Poland and France. It was the largest military operation of World War II, with more than three million German soldiers supported by another half million troops of Germany’s allies attacking on a broad front. But the shock and the killing of the initial invaders was not the worst. As they advanced, they were followed by Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units), that implemented mass-murder operations. For the Nazi invaders, the conquest of the Soviet Union was vastly different from operations in Western Europe. Nazi ideology regarded both Slavs and Jews as subhuman and considered Communism part of a larger Jewish conspiracy. This disdain for the Soviet people was

reflected not only in their brutal treatment of civilians but with their refusal to follow the Geneva Conventions for treatment of prisoners of war.

Out of the estimated 5.7 million Soviet soldiers captured by the Germans, 3.3 million were dead by the end of the war. In fact, in the overall scale of the Holocaust, Soviet prisoners of war (5 percent were Jewish) were second only to Jews as the largest group of victims of Nazi racial policy.<sup>4</sup> The Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek extermination camps were originally constructed to imprison and murder Soviet prisoners of war, and Zyclon B gas was tested first on Soviet POWs in Auschwitz.<sup>5</sup>

In the swaths of the Soviet Union occupied by the Germans, the death squads committed efficient civilian genocide, utilizing the pathways and technologies the military had already developed for handling the POWs. One million of the 5,693,851 Jews murdered in the Holocaust were from the Soviet Union. The only country with larger death tolls was Poland, which lost three million people – 90 percent of its Jewish population.<sup>6</sup> The Soviet Union lost 36 percent of its Jewish population – a figure that would have been so much higher had there not been millions of fierce warriors like Nadezhda Vasilyevna Popova.

Nadezhda was not the only woman fighting for Mother Russia. More than 800,000 Soviet military women went directly to the front.<sup>7</sup> Like the men, the majority were in support positions, but more than 300,000 served in combat roles, including as snipers, tank crews and pilots with fighter and bomber units. During the war, three regiments of women combat pilots were created: two bomber and one fighter. In addition, other women military pilots flew transport missions and ferried planes, including planes that were provided by the United States as part of the Lend-Lease program. These Soviet pilots would pick up planes that were flown to Alaska by the Women Airforce Service Pilots of the United States.

Nadezhda was with the 588th Bomb Squadron, which flew its first mission in June of 1942. After petitioning Moscow for a combat position following the death of her brother, Nadezhda was delighted. But her elation ended after her first mission, during which another plane was destroyed, killing two of her friends. After dropping her bombs, she returned to her base: “I was ordered to fly another mission immediately,” she told *Russian Life* magazine in 2003. “It was the best thing to keep me from thinking about it.”<sup>8</sup> She described a later mission that was particularly devastating:





It was near Krasnodar. The night before there had been so much shooting and now we knew where it was coming from. I flew first and did it in a cunning way: I gained more altitude and when closer to the target I swooped down. I let the bombs off straight into the ammunition dump and right there I was trapped by the claws of searchlights. I maneuvered and suddenly I saw them switch to another plane that flew after me. Enemy planes took off and shot it down, it caught fire and fell. That was one. Then I turned my head and saw a second plane go down in flames and then a third one lit up the sky like a falling torch. By the time I got back, four of our planes had perished with eight girls in them burned alive. My heart broke and there was a lump in my throat, tears in my eyes. What a nightmare, poor girls, my friends, only yesterday we had slept in the bunks together. . . . It was a tragedy.<sup>9</sup>

Over the four long years of the German invasion she lost more sisters and brothers in arms to the invaders, more friends and family and townspeople. This was relentless war.

The 588th flew only at night, and engaged in harassment bombings of German encampments, rear-area bases and supply depots. The biplanes they flew were small, capable only of carrying two bombs weighing less than a ton. But there were advantages to these small planes: They were slower than the stall speed of German Messerschmitt fighters, their wooden and fabric frames avoided radar detection, and when, on

approach to their target, they would cut their engines back to idle, the small engines made such little sound that they would frequently surprise the German soldiers on the ground, who often reported hearing only a slight whoosh of the fabric frames before bombs exploded. The aim of these missions was to disrupt and demoralize the enemy, so the psychological impact of these night attacks made up for the small bomb loads. "The Germans hated being made to scatter by women, calling them *Nachthexen*. One German source said "they were precise, merciless and came from nowhere."<sup>10</sup>

Typically the 40 planes of the 588th would fly at least eight nightly missions. Because of their small bomb loads, their routine was to bomb the target, circle back to their unlit airbase, get rearmed and fly back, again and again and again. On one mission, Nadezhda flew 18 missions – even more notable when one considers that US bomb crews could rotate home after 25 missions. "Almost every time," Nadezhda once recalled, "we had to sail through a wall of enemy fire."<sup>11</sup> Even without the threat of enemy fire, flying the open-cockpit biplane was dangerous, and in the Russian winter, deadly.

When the wind was strong, it would toss the plane. In winter when you'd look out to see your target better, you got frostbite, our feet froze in our boots, but we carried on flying. If you give up, nothing is done and you are not a hero.<sup>12</sup> ■