

Pushkin asked himself this same question in the nineteenth century, publishing in his magazine *The Contemporary* an excerpt from the notes of Cavalry Maiden Nadezhda Durova,* who took part in the war with Napoleon: "What were the reasons that made a young girl from a good aristocratic family leave her ancestral home, renounce her sex, take on labors and duties that even frighten men, and turn up on the battlefield—and what a battlefield! Napoleon's. What prompted her? Secret griefs of the heart? Inflamed imagination? An inborn irrepressible inclination? Love?"

Well, so—what? A hundred and some years later, the same question . . .

OF OATHS AND PRAYERS

Natalya Ivanovna Sergeeva

PRIVATE, NURSE-AIDE

I want to speak . . . to speak! To speak it all out! Finally somebody wants to hear us. For so many years we said nothing, even at home we said nothing. For decades. The first year, when I came back from the war, I talked and talked. Nobody listened. So I shut up . . . It's good that you've come along. I've been waiting all the while for somebody, I knew somebody would come. Had to come. I was very young then. Absolutely young. Too bad. You know why? I didn't even know how to remember . . .

A few days before the war my girlfriend and I were talking about the war; we were certain there wouldn't be any war. We went to the movies, there was a newsreel before the film: Ribbentrop and Molo-

* The daughter of a Russian officer, Nadezhda Durova (1783–1866) disguised herself as a man and served in the Russian cavalry during the Napoleonic Wars, for which she was much decorated. Her memoirs, entitled *The Cavalry Maiden*, were published in 1836.

tov were shaking hands.* The words of the narrator stamped themselves on my memory: Germany is the faithful friend of the Soviet Union.

Before the month was out German troops were already near Moscow . . .

We were eight children in our family, the first four were all girls, I was the oldest. Papa once came home from work and wept: "I used to be happy that we had girls first . . . Brides-to-be. But now in every family someone is going to the front, and we have nobody . . . I'm too old, they won't take me; you're all girls, and the boys are still little." In our family this was keenly felt.

Courses for nurses were organized, and my father took me and my sister there. I was fifteen, my sister fourteen. He said: "This is all I can offer for our victory . . . My girls . . ." There was no other thought then.

A year later I wound up at the front . . .

Elena Antonovna Kudina

PRIVATE, DRIVER

During the first days . . . Total confusion in town. Chaos. Ice fear. Everybody was catching some sort of spies. People said to each other: "Don't believe provocations." Nobody could accept even the thought that our army had suffered a catastrophe, that it had been crushed in a few weeks. We had been told that we'd make war on other countries' territory. "We won't surrender an inch of our land . . ." And we were retreating . . .

Before the war there were rumors that Hitler was preparing to attack the Soviet Union, but such talk was strictly forbidden. Certain organizations saw to that . . . You know what I mean? The NKVD . . .

* The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, named for the foreign ministers of the Soviet Union and Germany, was a nonaggression pact signed in August 1939. It was broken by the German invasion of eastern Poland in June 1941.