

Shoot, Comrade!

by Touma Aisaka / Hayakawa Publishing / Nov. 25, 2021

Introduction

“Shoot, Comrade!” is the debut novel by author Touma Aisaka. Set on the front lines of the German-Soviet war, where some of the fiercest fighting of World War II was seen, this full-length novel tells the story of a teenage girl named Serafima who makes her way across the battlefield as a female sniper for the Soviet Union.

The model for the unit to which Serafima belongs was an actual all-female Soviet sniper unit. The story unfolds by interweaving historical fact and real-life characters to explore themes of the unreasonableness and cruelty of war and the contradictions faced by those who fight in it. Unusual for a war story, this one is told through the eyes of a female soldier, and in a woman's own words. The story of Serafima, her choice to live as a sniper, the harshness of her training both in school and on the battlefield, and her anger, sadness, despair, and friendship with her comrades, has captured the hearts of many readers as a unique adventure novel that strongly addresses the issue of gender.

“Shoot, Comrade!” arrived in November 2021 as 11th winner of the Agatha Christie Award, given to an outstanding novel by a new author. The Agatha Christie Award was established by Hayakawa Shobo, Inc. and the Hayakawa Kiyoshi Literary Foundation in cooperation with Agatha Christie Ltd. of the United Kingdom, and is open to a wide genre of books including mystery novels, adventure novels, spy novels, and suspense stories. The book received rave reviews from many booksellers on social media even before it was released, and has been highly praised by writers and reviewers alike. Only one month after its release, the book was nominated for the prestigious Naoki Award, a literary award given to popular literary works, and was also voted number one in “Kinobes! 2022” a ranking determined by gathering votes from all of the bookstore clerks working at Kinokuniya, a major bookstore chain.

In February 2022 following Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine, “Shoot, Comrade!” attracted even more attention, winning the "National Booksellers' Choice Book of the Year 2022" literary award as well as the "Honya Tao Prize 2022," both awards chosen by bookstore clerks, as well as the "High School Naoki Prize," a Japanese literary award given by high school students. The novel has since been featured in the media numerous times, receiving many favorable reviews.

Touma Aisaka was born in Saitama Prefecture in 1985. He studied at Meiji Gakuin University’s School of International Studies. While working at a company, he spent his evenings diligently writing novels. In 2021, he made his debut as an author with "Shoot, Comrade!"

Aisaka was inspired to write this novel after reading "War’s Unwomanly Face," a 1984

nonfiction book by Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature. Inspired by a collection of testimonies from over 500 former female soldiers who served in the German-Soviet war, he began writing about the war as seen through the eyes of a single female sniper.

Synopsis

Serafima's story opens in the spring of 1940, during World War II. Serafima is a 16-year-old high school student who lives with her mother, Ekaterina, a skilled hunter, in the village of Ivanovskaya, a small farming village near Moscow. Part of her daily routine is to greet the villagers and go hunting with her mother, gun in hand. They hunt the deer that are destroying the fields and bring back the meat as food for the villagers. In the village, Serafima and Mikhail, a boy she has known since childhood, are treated like good friends and warmly watched over by the other villagers.

The following year, as the fighting escalated with Germany breaking the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact and launching an invasion of the Soviet Union, the sound of gunfire began to echo in even the most serene villages.

Then, in February 1942, when she was 18, Serafima's world changed radically. She had decided to leave the village and go to college to study German in order to become a diplomat, but one day, German soldiers suddenly appeared in the village of Ivanovskaya with information that partisans were in the area. Many villagers were murdered, the women were raped, and Serafima was captured. Through Serafima's horrified eyes and ears, we watch as the German soldiers loot and drink, and listen as they talk roughly about divvying up the women and make derogatory comments about Serafima, calling her a "dirty partisan sow" and a member of the "inferior Slavic race."

Serafima was saved by Red Army soldiers who arrived at the village in the nick of time. It is here she met Irina, a female soldier who asked her a simple question: does she want to fight, or die? Seeing everyone she knew lying dead around her, Serafima wanted most to join them, but when Irina declared that she did not need "defeated people without the will to fight" and announced a scorched-earth strategy to burn down the village, including the bodies, Serafima changed her mind.

Driven by a desire for revenge against the enemy, the German soldier who shot her mother, and the Red Army officer Irina who burned her mother, Serafima chose to join the Central Female Sniper Training School, where Irina, of all people, was to be her instructor. Irina, it turned out, was a female sniper who had fought as the partner of Lyudmila Pavlyuchenko, the so-called "Queen of Snipers" who shot and killed over 300 enemies.

At the school, Serafima and many other girls of similar age endured rigorous training to

hone their skills until they became sniper specialists. Though the girls had come from different backgrounds, Russians, Ukrainian Cossacks, and Kazakhs, each had lost loved ones in the war, had their homes burned down, and were filled with the desire to defeat Nazi Germany. There were rivalries within the student body, too, however. The Cossack and Kazakh girls also harbored hatred toward Russia.

The training was rigorous and many students dropped out until eventually only five remained. In November of the same year, the girls were assigned to the 39th Independent Platoon, which was to take part in the offensive to retake the city of Stalingrad, recently overrun by the German army.

The soldiers of the tank company who joined them on the battlefield were outraged, disappointed, and curious when they learned that women soldiers had been deployed. Serafima and her team racked up 16 kills in their first battle, but still the women were met with suspicious stares in place of praise. When the Soviets later succeeded in "Operation Uranus" – an encirclement of the German 6th Army within the city of Stalingrad – Serafima and her small 39th Independent Platoon headed for the besieged city, where they fought an urban battle from makeshift headquarters in a housing complex. In January of the following year, they retook Stalingrad.

Serafima eventually became a first-rate sniper through a series of tough battles during which she lost many of her comrades, and watched as those who lost morale or retreated without permission were summarily executed. Serafima couldn't help but feel that she was "getting closer to becoming a monster" as she became proud of her score – the number of men she had killed. But only a monster could survive this battle. Serafima had already realized that she was no longer the same person she was back home when, by chance, she was reunited with her childhood friend Mikhail in the barracks just before a decisive battle. He had become the commander of the Red Army's self-propelled artillery. However, in the barracks, the soldiers insulted Serafima and the other female soldiers by bragging of their sexual exploits with German women.

Later, in the final battle of Königsberg, Germany, Serafima identified the German soldier who killed her mother. Venturing alone into the enemy camp she was captured and tortured, but skillfully escaped and finally managed to kill her sworn enemy. Soon after, however, she saw Mikhail attempting to assault a German woman, just as the Germans had done in the Soviet Union. Serafima shot Mikhail with her own gun. She saw him fall through her scope and watched with relief as the woman escaped.

Serafima's story closes back in the village of Ivanovskaya, some 30 years after the war. The final scene is of a letter arriving at her doorstep from a journalist named Svetlana Alexievich. In fact, Serafima had been living quietly in her home village with Irina. Many of those who had mastered the art of killing and the way of the battlefield had difficulty

reintegrating to daily life. Serafima and the other female snipers were kept at a distance by the villagers, even years after the war ended.

The words "war's unwomanly face" written in the letter caught Serafima's attention. The story ends with Serafima deciding that the time has come to tell her story, in her own words. We are reminded that Serafima's war was not only a battle against enemy forces, but a fight to protect women.

Readers today may also be reminded of something else far more recent. Hearing the stories of Stalingrad under siege, it's impossible to not feel a kind of *déjà vu* when we realize that a similar story is playing out right now in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is as if the war described in the book and the war going on in the world today overlap in a constantly shifting pattern. Indeed, "Shoot, Comrade!" is not only a tightly crafted adventure novel that draws on numerous historical accounts and documents, but also an open question, asking us what we can do about the tragic war still going on today.

Sources

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