

DEATH BATTALION

By Robert Standish

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The crux of this novel excerpt is historical but it is not solely a re-telling of a past occurrence. The author's prose wavers between sketchy and finished and presents an intriguing stylistic idiosyncrasy. In other words, there is more than the story going on here. On a different plane it illuminates the experiences of an all women battalion 'on the front lines of the largest theater of loss' during a tumultuous period in Russia's history. (Spacing and font size are author's own.)*

Смерть батальон Death Battalion



самоотверженность

Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of the ladies of the Death Battalion; in honor of the brave steps taken on the frontline of the largest theatre of loss; come into the light beyond the shadow cast from the Iron Curtain.

I am inspired by the selfless strength of others.

The Death Battalion;

17-year-old Akilina Rabinovich, a worker in a Russian textile factory in Petrograd 1916, had lost her father to her countries past conflict with Japan, and now may have lost her fiancé to the Eastern front in the war to end all wars.

In the shadow of Russia's history of recent failure in war, and civil war, shortages, strikes and starvation, force the population to petition the Tsar, a chance meeting, Akilina sees the bravery of a woman, Maria Bochkareva as she takes control of the Imperial Police during this peaceful demonstration; defying orders from the Tsar to fire on the unarmed crowds, she allows the peasant force to have their voice; in doing so preventing another Bloody Sunday of 1905.

There may be hope. A woman in charge with such power means there is a choice to stand and fight. *We will fight until we die.*

Facing discrimination, starvation, and without true support from her country Akilina marches into certain death to the throats of the German Army and end the cycle of failures and put an end to a war Russia can't win, and lead the First Unit on the Western front as the women's First Death Battalion.

17-year-old Akilina Rabinovich, a worker in a Russian textile factory in war torn Petrograd 1916, strikes and shortages force rebellion in the now dangerous streets, witnesses the bravery of a woman, Maria Bochkareva as she takes control of the Imperial Police during this peaceful demonstration; defying orders from the Tsar to fire on the unarmed crowds, a frightening flash back to Blood Sunday, will follow the woman and march into certain death, to the throats of the German Army in a war Russia can't win, and lead the First Unit on the Western front as the First Death Battalion.

The Death Battalion

Chapter 1

BING, BONG, DING, DONG, BING; the clock in the hall sounds off breaking the silence of the night and continues to alert everyone that it's 5AM. The clock is so loud and the walls in the apartment are so thin everything rattles and dust is released from them and the ceiling. Akilina lays wide awake in her room but the sound still sends a spike of fear into her, she is very alert and doesn't blink, just turns to stare out the window. Looking out at the sky her heart knows that she is under the same sky as her love Sascha. He is fighting on the Western front so even with the distance there is still a connection to him however frail she will take it. She always thinks of the sky and how they share the stars because Sascha has written about it in his few letters to her, they are her treasures and his. A letter in Petrograd or on the front is anyone's treasure.

From her solitude she hears Victor her Grandfather and Vera her Grandmother walking around, older people are always awake so early, is it to make sure that life gives them one more day, she wonders, who knows, regardless sleep is not something she has been accustomed to most of her life. It is very hard living in a time of War and in Russia, since Akilina has known nothing but conflict and shortages she can only ever flash nap and never sleep through the night. Conflict is everywhere and it has almost always been a part of everyday life. One of her earliest memories as a child was on a Sunday in January outside the Winter palace in 1905, Ana, Akilina's Mom and her were out for a walk and were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

They were out for a walk and a crowd began to grow around them, hundreds of people came to the Palace, then hundreds more, turning to thousands. Akilina had never seen this many people, no one was shouting and there was no anger, just an ever growing crowd, then Police came to surround everyone and the Palace. There was so much confusion as one man stood out from the m all and proclaimed to be there in peace in the name of the people, the workers and only wished to present the Tsar with a petition. A simple document, then for no reason guns began to fire into the crowds. Ana tried to get them to safety but when you are surrounded every direction is death. Hundreds die around them as the shooting has no end, the one man proclaims his peaceful message begging for fair treatment for the workers, an end to the shortages and to end the war with Japan, "And if Thou dost not so order and dost not respond to our pleas we will die here in this square before Thy palace", is the last thing she hears him say as her mother throws her to the ground and the two pretend to be shot.

A lifetime passes as they lay there in the square frozen in fear surrounded by the dead. At 5 years' old that is a horrible memory to hold onto, but keeping it isn't by choice. It is still so vivid in her mind, she can see faces and all the colors as they rush from the living and turn red on the ground of the square in front of the Winter Palace. A life experience like this gives you a voice of defiance or a life of silence and surrender. In the darkness Akilina has yet to make her choice, for now she is waiting, waiting to see if Sascha will ever return home and fulfill his promise, waiting to see an end to yet another War, just waiting to see what terror will be new to replace the old.

BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG. The noise erupts without warning and Akilina jumps out of her soul and hits the floor and spins around and takes refuge under her bed in an instant. "Ha ha ha ha ha, Akilina I got you". "Dmitry, what are you doing, stop that right now, banging on the pipes is so dangerous and the noise is not needed". Akilina hears her Mom yell at her brother from down the hall. "I was just trying to make sure that everyone was awake, I am trying to help". He defends himself. "Well it's not funny and helps no one", is Akilina's angry response. AS it is most people are already awake and Victor takes his customary place in the kitchen on his chair and begins his day as he always did, he waits for his coffee and talks about the past, even if no one is there to hear it he will say it over and over again.

Ana and Vera are moving about getting things ready for their meal and the day as Akilina makes herself ready to join them, then all three work together as they do each day. Alexander, her

father is only a memory to them, as with most able bodied men they are needed at the front, he left to fulfil his duty never to return. There are so many families like this throughout Russia, it is becoming normal and only leaves behind the young, old, ill or undesirables behind to keep the effort in motion. Women have made their impact in an ever increasing way and are seen not as frail determinants but now assets and of value, without them nothing is possible. "Ana, do we have a newspaper today"? Victor asks, "No PAPPa I will be getting them later after work just the old ones here", she replies as she hands him a few older papers. He accepts them and looks through them now for the fourth or fifth time.

"Mother Russia never sleeps, she is never allowed to rest. We live as we have always seemed to live, in hard times. As long as I can remember there has been conflict. We used to strike, we were brave, to strike is criminal, but in defiance we still did, little by little we forced change. When I was at the cotton mill in 1884 we did just that and it was a hard sacrifice and took two years to get some of our demands met but it worked, we finally got a shorter work day to 11 and a half hours now and better work conditions, we had the Tsar pass it into law in 1890. That is how we did things, but not without cost. In between our battles Russia could breathe, but it never lasted too long". Victor, a bear of a man with a deep thunderous voice that always sounds angry even when he laughs, carries on talking as the activity takes place around him. There isn't much to prepare for any meal but they have learned to be grateful for very little.

BING, BONG, DING, DONG, BING; the clock sounds off again to make the our and continue to shake more dust from the ceiling and walls, in angered acceptance the ladies just wipe it away as they do time and again. This also tells Akilina and Ana that they need to get moving, they are expected at the textile factory, no one is late. Vera will deal with Dmitry until later in the afternoon when he also has a work responsibility. "Akilina, hurry come on". Ana pleads "And do not worry about your hair". Before the two ladies leave the apartment all of them sing to her Happy Birthday, today Akilina is 18. She runs back to her room, "one last thing", she always carries Sascha's last letter with her in case there is a moment in her day when she can read it all over again. Just holding it is her way of holding his hand.

The two have learnt that they are only able to write about things that are not political or about the war itself, Sascha is not to tell where he is and what they are doing and details about positions and equipment in case the letters are stolen by the Germans. They are considered military secrets and will be destroyed. Their letters are read through before being sent on. Neither of them care to give away any military secrets, they would rather talk about their feelings and experiences and make mention of things left out that tell of unwritten confessions and their desires, no one other than them would care about such things. Now Akilina will need to run as Ana has already left and is likely angry.

Running to catch up she leaves the apartment and gets to the stairs. They are four levels up and Akilina has become fast enough that she can hold her breath long enough to not smell how awful it can be. The stairwell reminds her of the terrible smell of damp earth, the smell that must wait to claim the dead, it is terrible she hates it and moves as quickly as she can. The building and apartment isn't even that old, the paint inside and wall paper is perhaps seven

years old but of such poor quality it is not able to keep its color and looks old well before its time. No need to be embarrassed when all of her friends live much like she does. It is almost like this area of St Petersburg, or Petrograd was built old.

As Akilina runs carefully to reach her mother from a distance they, could be sisters, they are so similar Ana is just shorter and her blonde hair is not as long but as thick, the meeting point with some other women she must navigate carefully, the roads are in horrible condition and all the streets had been renamed soon after the city was, but she knows where she is going. Just ahead she sees her mother and her closest friend Darina is just getting there. They have learned to stay together. It's safe and just a great way to keep it. Darina is so brave and strong with a kind heart she can also be abrupt and rude. She is the same height as Akilina but more athletic and has a natural beauty and dark hair that makes boys crazy. "Happy birthday AKILINA, are the first words from Darina's lips. With such excitement they hug in the street, Ana smiles warmly but kindly reminds them they need to move on. The small group of ladies makes their way to the factory. They are on time and the doors are open and they all enter together.

Most of the factories are in transition and Akilina needs to remind herself that Russia is growing and changing, all she can hear is her Grandfather's voice telling the open air that the Russian economy had seen steady growth since after the failure of the Japanese war in 1905 and other countries were manufacturing our machines and many goods and services like cars and truck, even trains. Parts of the country were moving forward faster than we could run so it made advancements hard to manage. She remembered that he had always feared our dependency on other countries like Britain and France and even Germany to take our natural resources and replace them with empty words. He was a wise man, and always believed one never pokes a bear unless they are themselves a bear of equal strength.

There is an increased demand for supplies to the front and so many factories rush to supply the need and gain contracts and favor with the Tsar. The easiest place was the textile factory, they could supply blankets and uniforms at great ease and change over quickly and that's exactly what they did. The factory would receive huge heavy rolls of cotton fabric on wagons in the street at the side of the building, they must have weighed hundreds of pounds. They would then be placed on the line and sent to be dyed the necessary color, dried then machines would section it off for the pattern makers.

Moving through the large doors they can hear the wagons approaching as they did three times a week, you could hear them long before they came into view. The large horses pounded the streets that were torn apart by the heavy loads and poor care. The streets had other issues as well, when you add this many horses to the city they bring their shit with them and it makes such a mess, like mud only much messier. The streets are forever clogged with it, mountains of it either making roads impassable as wagons and trucks would become stuck, or create such an uneven surface it was dangerous. No sooner did they make it inside and the wagons were at the side doors. Nicos was there to receive the large rolls, he is young and so much smaller than the rolls, it is almost comical to see him dwarfed by them.

BOOM

Out of the quiet of the morning a loud explosion shakes the ground around them all. One of the boilers from the factory next to theirs explodes, scares the horses and sends the massive rolls of fabric rolling out of the wagon, Nicos had no chance to move and is instantly crushed by them as the wagon and horses fight against their restraints. They all hold their breath not knowing if they are at first under attack. Once it is understood what happened everyone runs to help the workers at the factory next door, they are not aware that the rolls of fabric have crushed Nicos, not at first, but once there is no danger and the injured are removed from the building do they return to find him.

Even with the modernization and quest to catch up to the rest of the world they are still so far behind, there is always an unfair unbalance of technology being beyond the ability of the worker, or the worker needing better support to safely do what they require, this is not a dance or a game but is played out like one each time they enter the factories. It is very typical of what the people felt. They try to build cars that are not suited for the roads they can't maintain, railways without trains, farms without ways to ship produce where it is needed, fight a war without guns. They are humiliated and defeated by the actions of the Monarchy, the largest army unable to defend itself, unable to supply a land with a world of resources and land. Russia has every reason to be proud, yet seeks permission for nationalism. The workers suffer in unsafe places not fully ready for the responsibility of what the world asks.

It takes a few hours for things to return to a more organized normal state and the rolls are moved inside and Nicos is taken away. The ladies move to the line to try to fight off the memory of their morning, it is such a hard struggle to wipe away the memory of the day, time eases pains intensity and must go on, Akilina's questions this from her post, life goes on, why? She asks herself, as much as she understands that it's part of the cycle and no one has ever lived to change it and the world has never stopped regardless of who dies, the question remains, why? As roll after roll of fabric is sent to be dyed then dried, the roll that crushed Nicos is on display for everyone to see as the blood stains are the last evidence of his presence, they pass in front of them all one last time before they will be erased forever.

Excerpt from the completed novel
The Death Battalion
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authored by
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AUTHOR'S BIO: Robert Standish is an aspiring writer and devoted father of three. After several years in the film and television industry in Canada, he has had the chance to meet some amazing people, travel and experience things, not for normal consumption. As a camera assistant and operator he has been in the line of fire on many occasions and inside explosions and crashes, just to name a few incredible opportunities. 'Chalk Outline These Thoughts 1 and 2 and a fiction novel 'The Secrets Men Keep', most recently the creator of a collection of poetry entitled 'The Passion Hidden Within'. (*Amazon and Kindle*) I have found most recent success with three poems published on Terror House Magazine and soon a short fiction story will be published in February, it is my hope to extend and expand my exposure and develop as many relationships as I can. Now transitioning into a creative writer who has self-published four works and counting, Robert is setting his sights on the next project. His story **IF** appeared in Issue 2.