



## Rivka's War

*Marilyn Oser*

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Russia, 1914. Rivka, daughter of a prosperous boot maker, seems destined by tradition for marriage and the humdrum rounds of shtetl life.

Then war breaks out, and things go badly for the tsar's army. When demoralized troops begin deserting their posts in the trenches, one unlikely officer recruits a battalion of girls to set an example for the men.

Rivka seizes upon this chance for adventure as her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do something great in the world. She signs on, never suspecting the terrors that await her, or the trials that will test her, or the mishaps that will take her from the frozen steppes of Siberia to the hot, dusty hills of Palestine.

Based on actual events, Rivka's War is a riveting tale of loss and survival. In vivid detail, it portrays the impact of the Great War on Jewish life, re-creating a vanished world.

## Rivka's War Details

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## From Reader Review Rivka's War for online ebook

### Fran says

Rivka's War

Marilyn Oser

Sitting in a circle you can see what is happening in the world right in front of you. In back of you is what is still to come. Off to the left you might see what is about to happen and to the right what you hope or dread never would. As Rivka and her family see the world, not all of them view it through the same eyes. Their field of vision and perception of the times, the war that is about to come and those that will inflict pain, sorrow and death on so many, difficult to see and in some cases clouded. Her mother views the world as a place where she cares for her children, tries to speak her mind to her husband hoping that some day they will finally leave and go to the "land of gold," or America. Her father, a boot maker has made his way in their world by creating boots that not only the Jewish people covet but the gentiles too. Added in those in charge of the military, the Russians and the Germans seem to want what he and only he can create. Treating his workers fairly, paying higher wages than most his business has its ups and downs but for the most part thrives.

Mischa and Rivka are twins. One is smart and has a head for numbers and the other languages. Both twins different in so many ways and yet living in the same house but in two different worlds with dissimilar ideals for their futures. Mischa wants his life to run in a different direction than Rivka. Wanting to experience life outside of his village he is enthralled with the way things are happening when the Old Russian government falls and the New Russian is now in power. Justice, freedom and the rights of the people would surpass those of the rich and powerful. More than anything he was thrilled to be in Petrograd and to be educated even if how he got there required his father using more than just his influence and wealth. Listening to those in power speak and seeing the new Provisional Prince in person, hearing Leon Trotsky, and a man named Lenin thinking that his visions for the future was really what he would aspire too.

Rivka had her own vision for herself but quite different than you might think. Hearing her voice you begin to wonder whether she realized her worth and value to this family. Helping her father in his business, her mother at home and learning more about the war and the world Rivka's vision of what was yet to come on the left was quite different than Mischa's. With the war in coming and the changes coming through many Jewish people were persecuted, killed, robbed and their homes burned leaving them without anywhere to go. Some lived in camps others on the street and some tried to escape. But, one incident would change it all for Rivka as she goes down to the shed to change their goat's bedding and finds a precious little bundle that would become her life. A little baby boy that she would cherish and care for with all the love she could give to anyone. For two years she and her family took care of this child, nurtured him, loved him until the day things changed and her world crumbled. No matter how hard she fought she could not fight what did come and what was in front of her as the child's parents came and took him away.

Shattered, broken and forlorn Rivka, the girl with spirit seemed to have her light dimmed and her spirit fading. Not until her mother spoke about her own losses and explained that she was not the only one who has suffered at the hand of others, did she appear to understand, go back to work but she was still a shell of what she was before. Mischa has his own new perspective of what he hoped would come to pass. As he looks to the right of the circle where he sits within his own ring of life or hope he sees his father and family coming to live with him in this new world that he has found and become accustomed.

A reaction from his father that will set in motion a chain of events that will change Rivka's life. One letter with his thoughts and hopes for his family and himself might cause a silent war within his family equally as powerful as the one that has taken some many lives already. WWI cost many people their lives and the one that was brewing within this family might cost them even more.

Undying respect and loyalty is not easy to attain. As Rivka decides to defy her family, their wishes and their beliefs, listens to the words of one woman and becomes part of a battalion of young women willing to fight for what they feel is peace and freedom but in a way most would not fathom. The training more than brutal and rigorous, the rewards few and the punishments harsh, as a band of 1500 women enlist and undergo training that most men might not be able to endure. Throughout the novel you hear the voices of many people expressing their thoughts, views and beliefs about the war, how it should be fought and the compromises that many felt needed to be made. Some felt that within New Russia their should be committees to decide how to proceed whereas Yashka, the commander of Rivka's Battalion of Death, was unyielding in her views, beliefs and stopped at nothing to get what she wanted. At times feeling defeated, many of her troops leaving and joining committees, and then something unexpected happens. As Mischa tries to reach out to Rivka to sway her to join the other side, she does not and what happens is quite compelling and leaves her alone with only those left in the Battalion to call family. Are these really her beliefs or is she just brainwashed? What happened to the freethinking young girl as thoughts of her life before, her family and her young child flood through each time a friend is killed, they lose ground on a mission or Yashka takes an unorthodox action.

War takes on many faces but when the commander of their battalion is brutally killed what happens next will either endear you to Yashka or make you wonder what is going to happen next. Listening to Yashka relate what happened in Petrograd it seems that those at the top are fighting for control. Some banished to other places and a letter from her brother would enlighten her. There are so many wars being fought along with the one against Russia and Germany. At times the reader wonders whether Rivka is fighting for her own beliefs or that of Yashka. You often wonder whether she really believes in what she is doing or is just so enthralled with this woman she cannot see clearly the changes that the country is undergoing and decide what is really right. What about her family? Was she dead to them?

As Yasha's voice is heard when departing for Petrograd and her journey. You hear how she lived, struggled, her thoughts about the Germans, Russians and the war along with the many deceptions she created into order to survive. But, what happens next reminded her and the reader that no one was exempt or above what was deemed their law. As she was marched in place with many other women and about to be killed someone comes to the forefront and she receives what some would think a reprieve but others a stay of execution but for how long? But, the end came and she was freed and along with Rivka they take the next journey as we hear more voices relate their experiences. Filippov is the next voice followed by Aaronsohn, Avram and their final destination. The British and the Americans were sure to come an take over the city as you hear the voice of Filippov, Yashka and Rivka are targets and the end result still awaits. Rivka filled with confidence, went to the consulate and hoped as Rivka's journey and war takes on another direction. Illness strikes her and the author brings to light more than just the fears that plagued her and Yashka regarding their lives, freedom and the direction of the country as they embark for Israel and her first reaction not what you would expect. Rehovoth was where she wound up living in a barracks and the many controversies that are brought to light concerning a Jewish State, Yiddish vs. Hebrew and much more.

A man named Avram would change it all for her as one war did not end and another would be coming. Just how this all ends and where Rivka winds up as she finally comes to grips with what she sees within the circle that is now right in front of her. Author Marilyn Oser sums it up for Rivka, Avram and the reader when you read page 232 and hear his voice and hers as they decide when and if Rivka's War within herself and that of

the world come to an end?

The history, the story, the characters and the courage of so many are brought to light in this novel based on actual facts. Losses, hope, revenge, sacrifice, trust, deceit, lies and survival comprise this outstanding novel. Jewish life was difficult during the war and many might not realize that it is still difficult in many parts of the world now. The Yiddish expressions brought back many memories and the history of a nation that is still hoping to be recognized brought to light. Hear their voices, read their words, understand her struggle and find out more about this courageous woman and so many others. This is a five star novel.

Dedicate to all those that fought for freedom:

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Fran Lewis: reviewer

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### **Christoph Fischer says**

I requested to read and review "Rivka's War" from the publisher because of my interest in World War I and Eastern Europe.

Rivka is a young Jewish woman living in Russia during World War I. Russia is undergoing its messy Revolution, with Tsarist and Communist Governments laying claim to the country. Being Jewish complicates matters as does the changing battle line.

Rivka joins the army against all warnings and begins her complicated journey through Europe and Asia.

The book has an amazing story to tell and covers a huge amount of historic details and lesser known facts. Oser has given the times an authentic and realistic feel, backed up with meticulous research and knowledge, a great sense for the time and its people. I have read and researched the history of that period myself and am impressed with Oser's results.

Army life for women, the opposing forces in revolutionary Russia, the tough choices for anyone in the border territories but especially the Jewish people and the last parts about Palestine were incredibly informative and enjoyable. People forget how long before Hitler and World War II Jews have been subjected to persecution and random acts of violence, the long tradition of pogroms in Russia and Oser tops it all with several details about the British interest in Palestine and the Middle East.

The book is well written and kept my interest easily. The many new directions and locations the author took me to made this a very rich reading experience.

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### **Judith says**

I began reading this book with high hopes of finding a really interesting story of the Jewish struggles to survive the first world war in Russia. However the way Marilyn Oser presented Rivka left me cold for much of the time as she was such a difficult character to relate to. There is no doubt that Rivka's journey to find adventure and to try to bring meaning to her life once she had lost Dudie was arduous and dangerous. I was often left horrified by the trials she went through as a member of the Battalion of Death and later as a spy for the British in Palestine but I was not drawn to Rivka enough to have any empathy with her. I am sure the

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historical fact in the book is accurate but to a large extent I felt like I may as well have been reading a text book rather than a novel which is why I feel unable to rate Rivka's War any more highly than 2 stars.

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### **Nancy says**

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. Once again, I gained insight into a period of history I was not that familiar with - Ukraine and Russia during WWI and the Russian revolution. It was also a very timely book to read right now with the situation in the Ukraine. I feel like I have a better understanding of some of the issues in that region. Adding to that were the final chapters set in the Middle East.

Having a woman as the main character and seeing all of this unfold through her eyes made it even more interesting and enjoyable for me. The author did a great job of interweaving the external horrors into Rivka's day to day existence and making it truly seem more like a biography than a novel. I could imagine it being the way I would tell the tale if it were my story.

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### **Lynn says**

A Jewish girl wages war on many fronts. She joins the Russian Army Battalion of Death, a combat detachment of Russian women, fighting in the trenches against the Germans on the Western Front during WWI. Meantime, Russians are battling each other as the Tsar is assassinated and Lenin and Trotsky assume power. She makes her way to Palestine, finds herself "robed in sand, stone and sky" where she works for the British as they battle the Turks.

And, throughout the book, she fights with her own personal enemies. An abandoned boy, whom she loves and raises as her own, is reclaimed by his family. Her brother joins the Army. Her best friend is in an abusive marriage. Her idol and mentor deserts her to plead for assistance from America and England. A promise to a young Russian man haunts her. Guilt is her constant companion.

This book offers insight into war and into the establishment of the Jewish state in Palestine from a woman's point of view.

Though I thought the book dragged in parts, I found the ending is immensely satisfying.

I received this as an e-book from NetGalley.

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### **Jo says**

Rivka's War

By Marilyn Oser

Summary courtesy of [goodreads.com](http://goodreads.com)

Russia, 1914. Rivka, daughter of a prosperous boot maker, seems destined by tradition for marriage and the humdrum rounds of shtetl life.

Then war breaks out, and things go badly for the tsar's army. When demoralized troops begin deserting their

posts in the trenches, one unlikely officer recruits a battalion of girls to set an example for the men.

Rivka seizes upon this chance for adventure as her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do something great in the world. She signs on, never suspecting the terrors that await her, or the trials that will test her, or the mishaps that will take her from the frozen steppes of Siberia to the hot, dusty hills of Palestine.

Based on actual events, Rivka's War is a riveting tale of loss and survival. In vivid detail, it portrays the impact of the Great War on Jewish life, re-creating a vanished world.

#### Review

"Rivka's War" is my sort of book, steeped in historical fact with a healthy dose of adventure, and set in foreign lands. This held my attention from start to finish.

The setting is 1914 and Rivka is a young Jewish girl living in Russia. Its a country in turmoil the Tsars power is waning and communism is on the rise. Life is hard for Jews in Russia as they are looked on as the lowest of the low and are subjected to persecution and random acts of violence.

Rivka joins the army against all warnings and begins her complicated journey through Europe and Asia and ultimately home.

This book was really well written and is one I would recommend highly.

3.5 stars

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#### Becky says

##### RIVKA'S WAR by Marilyn Oser

This book should have been really interesting. What is not to like – a teenage girl leaves her prosperous home to “save” her brother from the influence of the Bolsheviks in 1914 and ends up joining the Russian Army in the first all-girl battalion and becomes the companion of a notorious counter revolutionary fleeing for her life. Eventually Rivka finds her way to Palestine.

Except, it just wasn't very engaging. Rivka was not very sympathetic. She seemed to have no real reason for joining the army. Her brother had no reason for becoming a Bolshevik, just as he never gave a reason for failing to commit to his Jewish faith after his triumph of a BarMitzvah. Yashka, the counter revolutionary beloved by “her girls” was not at all likeable. I didn't care if she lived or died and certainly wouldn't have joined her army.

There was a lot of history, but it was boring! There are a lot better books out there. I'll read them! The one episode that was interesting was with Dudie, the child Rivka “adopts” but is taken from her. Too bad more of the book didn't involve his story!

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#### Ann says

*I received this book from GoodReads First Reads*

Rivka joins the Russian Army, Battalion of Death to fight alongside other Russian women against the Germans during World War I. She joins with the hope of doing something more with her life, viewing this as

her only opportunity for adventure and to do something meaningful.

The story started to drag one quarter of the way through the book. I continued thinking that it would pick up, but it did not. Finishing this book was an ordeal in itself.

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### **Lorna Holland says**

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

I found this to be a very slow starter, with a plot that seemed to jump around between characters and places quite a lot. It was thought-provoking, but lost me with some of the language.

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### **Patty McCormick says**

I found this book to be fascinating! A young Russian woman who is Jewish joins a Russian battalion of women to fight the Germans! The book is also about the leader of their troop a woman named Yashka. I have been reading and learning about WWI lately and I feel this book contributed to my understanding of the war. It presents us with the Russian politics of WWI and the persecution of the Jews that occurred during this time. I was engaged in the story and her travels and I was not bored or overwhelmed with the politics. Unlike other books I have read in the past, I was able to understand the politics involved and what was going on in this book. It is an interesting piece of history. Rivka was a remarkable woman. I enjoyed reading this story. I think the story line is a great one! This writer is still developing her own writing style. I felt this was a good book. I give it a 4 out of 5 stars.

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### **Mandy says**

Strangely, this was a book I enjoyed more in retrospect than while I was actually reading it, as it was afterwards that I discovered just how much of it was based on historical fact. There were times when I was reading that I felt sure that Marilyn Oser was simply making things up – but indeed she wasn't, and that makes this novel a really fascinating and eye-opening read. Her research has been meticulous and wide-ranging, and has opened my eyes to a whole new layer of Russian WWI history.

The novel starts in Russia in 1914. Mischa and Rivka are twins. Mischa is allowed to go to Petrograd, which is a hotbed of new ideas and revolutionary fervour. Rivka is expected to stay at home and become a good Jewish wife and mother. But this is not what Rivka wants out of life. She wants to have the sort of adventures that her brother is free to enjoy. So when she hears of a newly formed Women's Battalion she is determined to join it. From that moment her life takes a turn that she could never have imagined, and we follow her from the battlefields of Russia to those of the Middle East and Palestine.

The Battalion has been formed by Maria Bochkareva, a passionate and fearless patriot, whose efforts to defeat Germany lead her to not only fight but to travel to America and England to try and persuade them to support Russia in her struggle. And this is where I started to doubt the veracity of the tale. But it's all based on verifiable fact. Bochkareva did indeed meet with Woodrow Wilson and George V, she did indeed lead her Battalion both ruthlessly and fearlessly, she was indeed admired by Emmeline Pankhurst – another encounter that surprised me. The book is of course about Rivka, who in many ways is the main protagonist, but it is Yashka, as she was known, who is perhaps the more interesting character, and it is the real life people (more

of them in the book than fictional ones) that make this such a riveting read.

As a piece of literary fiction, it is sometimes a little clichéd, and some of the characters verge on the stereotypical, but as a work of historical fiction it is absorbing and I defy any reader not to go scurrying to Google after finishing it to find out more. Highly recommended – and my thanks go to Netgalley for sending it to me.

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### **Claire Robinson says**

3 Stars.

The synopsis on this book piqued my interest, so I requested a copy through Netgalley.

Unfortunately it was a little slow starting for me, it was well written, but took a while to get going. You can tell the author has taken a lot of time researching the subject matter, in particular the role of a group of Russian girls in the Great War, and the example they then set to the male troops who were at the time deserting their posts.

In particular a Rivka, as well as being young she is Jewish which adds further complications to her journey across Europe and Asia during a messy war and revolution.

It was interesting to read of her plight, and the experiences she went through, although sometimes I felt it was a little too “in depth” however seeing as it is based on true events, I suspect the author was trying to include as much of her research and keep as true to the facts as she could.

Overall, it was readable, and I would read other work from this author.

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### **Allan H. Goodman says**

Interesting story about the Russian revolution, World War I, and early 20th century Palestine.

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### **Sue Parker Gerson says**

Didn't love this book. I found the writing to be at times melodramatic, at times pedantic, and at times too gory to continue. The reason I gave it two stars despite this is because it's clear the author has done her homework and has portrayed the events with historical accuracy.

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### **Shomeret says**

My main reason for selecting Rivka's War by Marilyn Oser to download from Net Galley was that its protagonist arrived in Palestine at the same time as my maternal grandfather. I wanted to know more about the situation in Palestine at that time. Yet Rivka's adventures begin in Russia during World War I. She was

actually a combatant as a member of a women's battalion. So as a feminist, I was also interested in finding out how the women's battalion came about, and how Rivka ended up joining it.

This was a fascinating novel, but I never really grasped Rivka's motivation for joining the Women's Battalion of Death. I understood that she was inspired by Maria Bochkareva, the founder of the Women's Battalion who was known as Yashka. Yet Yashka was a Russian patriot. Rivka was a Jew who had experienced persecution in Russia. Why would she want to fight for the Russian Tsarist cause? It's true that people don't always respond rationally. Rivka's loyalty to Yashka clearly had an emotional basis. Perhaps Rivka thought that Yashka exemplified her heroine, the Biblical Yael. Perhaps Rivka also thought that she was proving that she could be Yael herself.

The characters were interesting and the plot was compelling, but the roles that both Rivka and her brother Mischa played didn't end up having the consequences that they expected. Neither the Reds nor the Whites of Russia were ultimately very supportive of Jews, and in Palestine 20/20 hindsight tells me that British rule would not end up being an improvement for the Jews. So this book serves up huge helpings of historical irony. Readers who find irony entertaining will consider it a very satisfying read.

For my complete review see my June blog entry "Rivka's War: A Jewish Woman as a Historical Participant in Russia and Palestine" at <http://www.maskedpersona.blogspot.com>

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