

Women

In History



Kyivan Princess Olga

The first princess of Kyiv made it quite clear she was not a woman to be messed with.

Olga ascended to the throne in 945 AD after her husband was killed by Drevlians and her son was yet too young to rule. She would eventually become the first Christian in Kievan Rus and was made a saint with the epithet “Equal to the Apostles, Blessed Princess.”

The accounts of her life are mostly from the “Primary Chronicle” and it is likely some of the tales are exaggerated. However, it is known that she married Prince Igor I and gave birth to Sviatoslav. She ruled over land that includes modern-day Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

Greed contributed to her husband’s death when he demanded more tribute from the Drevlians after their initial offering. They tied him to tree trunks and tore him in two. Olga took the throne as regent, the first woman to rule Kievan Rus.

MARRIAGE REFUSAL

That might have been the end of things, but the Drevlians decided that Olga was weak and they could take her land. They sent an envoy demanding that she marry her husband’s murderer.

The Primary Chronicle reports that she responded, “Your proposal is pleasing to



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me, indeed, my husband cannot rise again from the dead. But I desire to honor you tomorrow in the presence of my people. Return now to your boat and remain there with an aspect of arrogance. I shall send for you on the morrow and you shall say, ‘We will not ride in horses nor go on foot, carry us in our boat.’ And you shall be carried in your boat.”

The next day, Kiev residents carried the envoy’s boat—all the way to newly dug trenches. They were thrown in and buried alive while Olga taunted them.

Before news spread of that deed, Olga sent a message to the Drevlians asking that their most distinguished leaders escort her to Dereva.

They eagerly agreed and when they arrived, Olga invited them to bathe in the bathhouse.

After they all had entered, she set it on fire and burned them to death.

VISITING HER HUSBAND’S KILLERS

Her thirst for revenge was still not sated. Olga sent the Drevlians another message, this time saying she would come in person. She told them that before she could marry their prince, she had to mourn her husband over his grave. She demanded they prepare much mead and hold a funeral feast.

They followed her orders and proceeded to get very drunk. Olga commanded her followers to kill them. Reports

say 5,000 Drevlians were killed that night. She then led an army to take over their cities.

She lay siege to their final city for a year and a half.

Finally, she told them she’d had enough and wanted no further revenge. She would go home if they paid her tribute of three pigeons and three sparrows from each house.

When they did so, she had her army attach sulphur and cloth to each bird. That night, they set the cloth on fire and released the birds—who returned to their nests, setting every house on fire. Those who fled the city were either slaughtered or taken as slaves.

BECOMING A SAINT

While that may not seem like very saintly behavior, she did eventually go to Constantinople where she was wooed by the emperor and baptized into the Eastern Orthodox faith.

She was the first to bring Christianity to Rus and while it was her grandson who converted the country, she was known as the first missionary. Her feast day is July 11.

She was also hailed for her regency because she set up trade routes, evaded marriage proposals that might have split the kingdom, protected the city against siege, and established hunting grounds.

Moreso than nearly any other saint, she showed that women could rule with power, strength and intelligence. She had the spirit of a warrior and the brains of ruler.

The Trung Sisters

The Trung Sisters weren't about to give up their rights even when the enemy was much bigger and more powerful than they were.

Born around 14 AD, the Trung sisters are heroines of legend in Vietnamese culture because they stood up to corrupt Chinese officials and, for a time, managed to expel them from their country, what is now known as Northern Vietnam.

At the time, Chinese women had few rights, but that was not at all the case for Vietnamese women. They were allowed to own land, inherit and do many of the same things men were. The Trung sisters—Trung Trắc (the older one) and Trung Nhi were taught martial arts, warfare and fighting skills when they were growing up. Their father died when they were young, but their mother, Lady Man Thien, refused to remarry, instead focusing on her daughters and making sure they were skilled at military strategy, sword and bow fighting, according to Beyond Words.

UNPOPULAR OCCUPIERS

The Chinese Han Dynasty at the time were controlling the area where they lived, but they mostly allowed Vietnamese aristocracy to rule. However, the Chinese governor of the Jiaozhi province, Su Ding,



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decided to change things. He began demanding bribes, trying to bring in Chinese culture that would take away the rights of women, and instituting many new taxes, including a very unpopular tax on salt.

Trung Trắc's husband, Thi Sách, resisted and Su Ding responded by beheading him without trial and then hanging his body from the city gates. In some accounts, it is said that he also raped Trung Trắc. In March of 40 AD, the two Trung sisters rose up in rebellion against the Han.

They were remarkably suc-

cessful. They raised an army of 80,000 men and women.

Included in their army were 36 female generals, including their elderly mother, according to the website Ancient Origins. The two sisters rode elephants into battle and within a few months had taken over 65 Chinese citadels and expelled the Chinese.

RULING AS JOINT QUEENS

According to contemporary sources from both the Chinese and the Vietnamese, the two women ruled as queens for

three years.

They established an independent Vietnamese nation after more than two centuries of Chinese rule. It stretched from what is now southern Vietnam into southern China. As co-rulers, they abolished many of the Chinese taxes and other policies they felt were unfair.

Their rule was short because the Chinese were infuriated at their actions and raised a large force which they called a "punitive army." The two sisters and their army were defeated. Their exact fate var-

ies depending on the source. Some say they were captured, some say they died in battle, some say they committed suicide rather than be taken and others say they were taken up in the clouds.

While their rule was short, they were never forgotten. Temples honoring them sprung up across Vietnam and even to this day there are holidays remembering how they fought for their country's independence. They are symbols of freedom and resistance and have inspired generations of soldiers.

Queen Liliuokalani

Queen Liliuokalani was both the first queen of Hawaii and the nation's final monarch.

Today she is hailed for her peaceful resistance to American expansion and the annexation of her country as the United States' 50th state.

Born on Sept. 2, 1838 in her grandmother's grass hut in Honolulu, she was named Lydia Lili'u Loloku Walania Kamaka'eha. Born into a high-ranking family and baptized as a Christian, she was well-educated and toured the Western world when she was young. In 1877, when her brother died, she was named crown princess and given the name Liliuokalani.

She married an American, John Owen Dominis, the son of a Boston sea captain and an official in the Hawaiian government.

ACTING AS REGENT

Long before she took the throne, she acted the part of a royal. When the reigning king Kalakaua took a world tour in 1881, she was regent. It was more than just a title, she ruled and responded to national crises. Among them was dealing with the smallpox epidemic. She immediately initiated a quarantine and closed all the ports to keep the disease from spreading. It was successful in that the disease stayed in Honolulu and O'ahu. However, there were 789 cases with 289



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deaths—a rate of more than 36 percent with mostly Native Hawaiians being affected.

She visited a leper settlement which would have a life-long effect on her. She would advocate for land to be set aside for a leprosy hospital and would make Father Damien, a priest who worked with lepers, a knight commander of the

Royal Order of Kalakaua.

She was known for organizing schools for Hawaiian youth, especially for women and promoted the economic power of women by creating banks and lending societies for them.

When she took a world tour in 1887, she met with both President Grover Cleveland

and Queen Victoria.

ASCENDING THE THRONE

In January 1891, the king died and Lili'uokalani became the first woman to sit on the Hawaiian throne. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be for long. One of her first acts was to try to replace the

Bayonet Constitution, a document forced on her predecessor by anti-monarchists who wanted to transfer power to American and European elites. She worked on a new constitution that would restore the monarchy and give voting rights to the economically disenfranchised.

These actions led to pro-American factions leading a coup on Jan. 17, 1893. It was aided by U.S. Marines landing on the island under the name of protecting American interests. She was deposed and there was briefly a Republic of Hawai'i. President Cleveland blocked the annexation of the islands and advocated unsuccessfully for the queen's restoration.

Lili'uokalani continued to try to take back the throne and her supporters led an unsuccessful uprising. She was placed under house arrest, charged with treason and in 1895, she formally abdicated, though she later tried to claim it wasn't valid since she didn't sign with her royal name.

Under President William McKinley, the U.S. annexed Hawai'i in July 1898.

Lili'uokalani published "Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen" that year and composed "Aloha Oe," which would become the island's anthem. It was one of more than 160 songs and chants she wrote during her lifetime.

Lili'uokalani would live in her residence as a private citizen until she died on Nov. 11, 1917.

Nellie Bly

Long before Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein gained fame as the investigative reporters who broke open the Watergate scandal, Elizabeth Cochran Seaman — aka Nellie Bly — would lay the foundation for all reporters who would follow her.

Born in 1864, she received an excellent education but had to leave school to support her mother after her father died and her stepfather was abusive, leading to a divorce. She soon found it was hard to get a job as a woman.

STARTING A NEWSPAPER CAREER

In 1885, she angrily responded to a newspaper column titled “What Girls are Good For” as it said their sole purpose was marriage and child-rearing. The editor of the Pittsburgh Dispatch was impressed with her writing and hired her. As was common for women at the time, she wrote under a pen name—Nellie Bly, inspired by a Stephen Foster song.

She quickly proved her worth as a reporter covering labor and poverty issues as



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they affected women. For six months, she was sent as a correspondent to Mexico, fleeing there when she was threatened with arrest for exposing corruption there.

INVESTIGATING AN ASYLUM

While her column was popular, she grew frustrated at being allowed to write only on topics concerning women. She

quit and went to New York. She faced much rejection from editors unwilling to hire a woman until she pitched a story to Joseph Pulitzer at New York World. He rejected her idea but assigned her to investigate Blackwell Island, a notorious mental institution.

It was an assignment that would make her famous. She faked mental illness to get admitted into the hospital so

she could get a first-hand look at the practices there. She spent 10 days there before the New York World intervened and secured her release.

She wrote a six-part series which gained her national fame. Her accounts were shocking and it led the state to increase funding and improve conditions in the asylum. Her reporting became a model for others and gave birth to investigative reporting.

She continued to expose corruption, black markets and abuses in New York.

AROUND THE WORLD

Then, in 1889 she read Jules Verne’s book “Around the World in 80 Days” and decided to try to beat that record. The New York World publicized the trip and offered a grand prize trip to Europe to the person who could accurately guess when she would return. They published daily accounts of her trip as she traveled through England, France, the Suez Canal, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. Traveling mostly alone, she made it back to New York in a record 72 days.

For a while she published serial novels, novels that were lost until 2021 when David Blixt, an author who had written several historical fiction novels about Bly, found and republished several of them.

INDUSTRIALIST AND INVENTOR

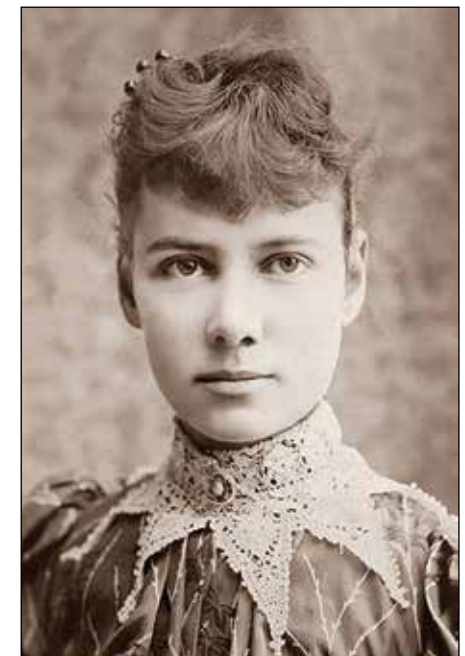
When she turned 30, she married a millionaire, Robert Seaman, who was 73. She left

reporting to take care of him and when he died, she took control of his Iron Clad Manufacturing Company and American Steel Barrel Company. A new challenge, she would end up registering several patents for her inventions. She also set out to create a socially just workplace that included health care benefits and recreational facilities.

However, she would not remain long in the position of leading female industrialist as her money management skills were not as good as her writing ones and several of her employees embezzled money leading her to declare bankruptcy.

She returned to writing, covering the Suffragette movement and reporting on World War I from the front line. She was even arrested when she was mistaken for a British spy.

In 1922, at age 57, she died of pneumonia.



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Gladys Bentley

Today, Gladys Bentley likely would have found acceptance and been hailed for her musical talent. However, Bentley, a blues singer, performer and cross-dressing lesbian, was born in 1907 and faced a lifetime of harassment even when she was having her greatest success.

Bentley, a part of the Harlem Renaissance, was a Black Woman whom Jim Wilson, author of the book “Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance,” told Smithsonian Magazine was a “gender outlaw.”

From birth, her mother rejected her because she wanted a boy and not a girl and Bentley found that she much preferred the clothing and style of men. She had a crush on her female teachers, her first hint that she was not heterosexual. Her parents took her to doctors in an unsuccessful attempt to “cure” her.

PERFORMING IN HARLEM

At age 16, she left home and arrived in Harlem. Wearing



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tuxes and top hats and flirting with women, she developed a reputation for her outrageous, raunchy songs, not hesitating to be as filthy as possible as she created new lyrics to familiar tunes. She was hailed for her musical talent as a singer and a pianist.

She soon gained fame—Langston Hughes had high praise for her, talking about how she played piano all night

with an enviable stamina. “Miss Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musical energy—a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard—a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm,” he wrote.

Her first job was at a gay speakeasy, Harry Hansberry’s Clam House. Later she would perform at the Ubangi Club

where she earned enough to hire servants and buy a car. She soon began touring the country and being welcomed by celebrities of the day. She’d record several records and while she had a wide range, she most often sang in a deep, growly, booming voice.

She claimed more than once to have married a white woman in a civil union, but there is no record of the mar-

riages.

MOVING TO CALIFORNIA

Once Prohibition was repealed, she moved to southern California, performing as “America’s Greatest Sepia Piano Player” and the “Brown Bomber of Sophisticated Songs.” However, the country was growing more conservative and it was becoming more dangerous to dress in men’s clothing.

While she had been openly lesbian during the 20s, the McCarthy Era changed things. She claimed to have taken female hormones that made her “a woman again” and married a man. She wrote an essay in 1952 for “Ebony” titled “I Am a Woman Again” about how she was cured from homosexuality, though historians suspect she might have done that as a way of reinventing and protecting herself.

She began to get involved in religion and was studying to become a minister in the Temple of Love in Christ, Inc. in California when she died from pneumonia in 1960.

Tisa M. Anders, in an article for Black Past, described Bentley as “one of the most well-known and financially successful black women in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. She was a pioneer in pushing the envelope of gender, sexuality, class and race with parody and exaggeration, personally and professionally.”

Today, she is recognized as an icon for her courage and talent.

Mulatto Solitude

When it came to freedom from slavery, Mulatto Solitude was among the fiercest fighters in the 19th Century Caribbean and she would die a martyr, defiant to the end.

Born and raised in Guadeloupe, Solitude's mother left her on the plantation when she escaped slavery to live as a Maroon. Maroons were those Africans who refused to be enslaved or to work on plantations. It is suspected that she was the issue of rape, her father one of the sailors on the boat that brought her mother to the Caribbean from Africa.

She named herself Solitude, a name recorded only on the writ that later condemned her to death. Mulatto was given her because of her light skin.

In 1789, France abolished slavery which angered the plantation owners in the colonies. In response to their demands, Napoleon re-established slavery in the colonies in 1802. Among the troops he sent to do so were officers of color who resisted and helped lead a movement against the French Republican Army.

FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM

Solitude joined the battle on May 8, 1802. She was joined by many women on the battlefield who performed whatever tasks they could to keep the soldiers



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armed, to treat their wounds and to carry the dead off the field. They carried orders back and forth and historians say that they rallied the men and led them on to greater acts of courage.

Solitude was said to have borne arms in the battle. She was pregnant at the time, but fought with great rage. She was reported to have threatened prisoners with the most insulting of language and violence.

On May 28, the battle went against the freedom fighters. One group suffered defeat with 675 people dying and 250 taken prisoner—most of whom were

shot and killed over the next few days.

The remaining group knew they were badly outnumbered but were unwilling to surrender and face slavery. When the French advanced, they blew themselves up with stores of gunpowder, taking hundreds of French fighters with them.

MARTYRDOM

Solitude observed the martyrdom. She was injured, but survived, leading to her capture. The French condemned her to death, however, because she was pregnant, her execution was delayed. Her child

was considered the property of a slave owner.

She gave birth in November and the next day, with milk still staining her nightshirt, she was hung. She was 30 years old.

Her last words were, “Live free or die.”

For many years, she faded from memory, though she was listed as being one of the martyrs. In 1972, André Schwartz-Bart published a novel about her, fictionalizing her as a heroine in “La Mulâtresse Solitude.”

Since then, her legacy has returned to the light. In 1999, a

statue of the pregnant Solitude was erected in Guadeloupe. In 2007 another one was raised, this time celebrating the abolition of slavery and made of an African hardwood. In 2008, her life was the inspiration of a musical comedy. Others have written poetry and songs about her.

There have since been streets named after her in Guadeloupe and she has a French postage stamp in her honor. She is slated to become the first statue of a Black woman to be installed in Paris in what will be called the Solitude Garden.

Empress Matilda

While history will ever hail Queen Mary I as the first woman to sit on the British throne, she would have been the second if the English nobles had stuck to their vows.

Empress Matilda, daughter of Henry I, granddaughter of William the Conqueror, was the designated heir when Henry I died. However, the nobles rebelled at the idea of having a woman on the throne, especially one who had lived overseas for most her life and instead crowned her cousin, Stephen, setting off a civil war that would last for years.

EARLY LIFE

Matilda was born in 1102 to King Henry I and Matilda of Scotland, daughter of King Malcolm III of Scotland. She was the eldest child with a younger legitimate brother, William. She also had at least 22 illegitimate siblings.

Her father shipped her to Germany when she was 8 to be betrothed to the German King Henry V and crowned queen. Five years later she would officially marry the king and start taking an active role in ruling the country. By 1117, she had claimed the title of Empress.

When her husband went off to war, she was named regent and managed the country in his absence, gaining plenty of



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experience that would have qualified her to later rule England. Unfortunately, they had no children and her husband contracted cancer, dying in 1125. At age 23, she left Germany and moved to Normandy.

PROMISED LOYALTY

Meanwhile in England, her younger brother died in a shipwreck. Her father married again trying to have another son, but no children came of that marriage. At Christmas in 1126, he gathered all the Anglo-Norman barons at

Westminster and they swore to recognize Matilda and any future heir she would have as the rightful rulers of England.

While she was opposed to the match, her father married her to Geoffrey, the eldest son of a Normandy Count. He was 13 years old and she was 25; he was a count and she was an empress. Their marriage got off to a rocky start, but after several interventions, they established an amiable partnership. They very quickly had two sons and would eventually have a third.

Matilda traveled to England

where she appeared before the King's council who once again took an oath to support her as the rightful heir.

USURPED

When King Henry died unexpectedly in 1135, the council had a change of heart. Stephen reached London first where he was very popular with the crowds. While Stephen himself had vowed to support Matilda, his brother, a bishop, convinced him that the oath wasn't valid. He was crowned King.

Stephen gave plenty of parties and gifts which made him popular in London, but he soon had problems with those who were willing to support Matilda—particularly her Uncle David, king of Scotland and some bishops who appealed to the Pope.

CIVIL WAR

Eventually, Matilda would invade England. War raged between the two cousins and for a while it looked as though Matilda would win. She captured London and Stephen. However, she could not convince the church to crown her and she had to settle for the title "Lady of England." Stephen's wife, also named Matilda, led the battles to restore her husband. Eventually, Matilda freed Stephen in an exchange of prisoners and the war continued. She made a dramatic winter escape from a siege, wearing white to hide her against the snow as she fled.

The civil war raged from 1139 to 1153 when the Church intervened. It was agreed that Stephen would be king during his lifetime, but he would adopt Matilda's son Henry and name him successor. Stephen died a year later and Matilda's son was crowned king, using one of the imperial crowns that Matilda had brought back from Germany.

MOTHER OF KING

Matilda spent the rest of her life in Normandy, supporting her son's rule and assisting in several diplomatic crises, including trying to intervene in the dispute between Henry and Thomas Becket.

At age 65, she died. Her tombstone read: "Great by birth, greater by marriage, greatest in her offspring: here lies Matilda, the daughter, wife and mother of Henry."

Four more centuries would pass before another woman would have a legitimate claim to the throne.



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