



**By Us Alone:  
Army Veterans, Patriotic Values and  
the Re-Militarization of Russia, 1991-2022**

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## Short Abstract

This thesis investigates the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989) and two military operations in Chechnya (1994-1996, 1999-2000) and shows that they still have a significant impact on Russian society, influencing it in fundamental ways, from political and social processes down to the socialization of private citizens.

My study contributes to answering two key research questions: in what ways do Russian citizens experience the shifts in social norms, conventions and public discourses brought home by former soldiers? And how exactly did the veterans of these wars become one of the powers supporting the regime? I show how the interests of veterans have been corresponding to, conflicting with, or existing in interplay with, the interests of the state during the last three decades, and how the wars made veterans continue building their self-identity in compliance with the narratives accepted by their comrades-in-arms.

I also examine the social consequences of veterans' exposure to violence in wartime, which include further violence in later wars, in criminal gangs, and at home. I look at changes in gender norms in post-war society and claim that army service has been crucial for shaping male identity, and a rise in militaristic masculinity became one of the legacies of these wars. The final question that I explore is the role of veterans in the militarization of Russian society through the implementation of the state programmes of "patriotic education", which also play a significant role in normalizing violence and spreading it throughout Russian society.

The discussion is based on my own semi-structured interviews with war veterans conducted in 2019-2021, and interpreted in terms of narrative analysis. They constitute completely new primary sources which can be used in future research.

## Long Abstract

This thesis looks at the relations between Russian war veterans, society and the state in Post-Soviet Russia. I aim to investigate the legacies of the wars waged by the country in the recent past (from 1979 onwards). The questions that run through this thesis are: what do soldiers bring home together with them after the end of military actions? How have Russian social conventions and norms have changed because of these wars? What are the ways in which the military ethos, preserved by former soldiers, influences the civilian public around them? Why, unlike veterans of many other wars, did Russian ex-combatants, far from opposing the regime, become one of the powers supporting it?

The thesis is comprised of four chapters, each dedicated to different ways in which the military ethos infiltrates postwar life. In the first chapter, I draw a general outline of relations between the military and society more broadly, and trace the main itineraries of ex-combatants after coming home. In the second chapter, I look at shifts in official narratives relating to the two Chechen wars and show how, from a depiction of the deaths of conscripts, the representations in these narratives moved to the glorification of a valorous battle with international terrorism. The third chapter investigates shifts in gender norms and the concept of masculinity as the result of the wars. The final chapter is dedicated to the involvement of ex-soldiers in the patriotic education of youth and the main ideologies that are disseminated. Analyzing official documents, I look at the governing understanding in contemporary state discourse of the key terms “patriotism”, “distortion of history”, and “spiritual values”.

As the main sources for my research, I use 24 oral interviews with veterans of wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya which I conducted from autumn 2019 to autumn 2021 in six Russian regions. Most of my informants had never been interviewed before and, while talking to me,

they reassembled their lives, trying to find a way to relate to the wars they had participated in. I studied these interviews using narrative analysis and tried to identify ways in which the narratives had helped informants to construct their identities; the leitmotifs they used; the clichés or narrative structures they resorted to most often.

As a way of approaching these questions, I initially identified three periods of change in the attitude towards the local wars within the state and society and in the process of militarisation. The first one lasted for most of the 1990s and was characterized by the negative attitude to the war in Afghanistan in Russian society. Citizens stigmatized and marginalized ex-combatants; they were frightened by the "Afghan" and "Chechen syndrome" and by what they believed to be potentially aggressive and violent people with traumatic military experience. Veterans felt isolated in their communities and abandoned by the state. In my thesis, I hypothesize that initially, while conscripting soldiers, the state offered them a sort of agreement in which risk to life, traumatic experience and change of identity had to be accompanied by public respect and social benefits. The state did not fulfil its part of the contract. Instead of respect and honour, ex-combatants faced alienation, hostility and unemployment. The state did not want to be associated with these wars. These wars were discussed as meaningless and lost. At the same time, the state called veterans heroes and praised their unity; claimed that they were fighting bravely and supported their brothers-in-arms devotedly. However, I claim that former soldiers were not able to accept such rhetoric. They wanted the state to accept responsibility for their social benefits and thus presented themselves as victims, betrayed and abandoned. Among themselves, in their memoirs, articles and prose, veterans continued to consider each other heroes and paradoxically reproduced the state discourse. The veterans preserved the military ethos. It has been relatively stable, independent of social change, while the world around has altered and they have been unable to find their way back to it. Due to this, they often seek employment in other "hot spots", in police or private security agencies.

At the same time, when in the 1990s the state lost its monopoly on violence and coercion, and a lot of veterans joined the new criminal organizations that emerged and flourished all over the country. The criminal activities of former soldiers completely ruined their reputation in society. At the same time, many veterans' alliances were initially formed as gangs or transformed into ones. I hypothesize that this period was the only one when the alliances were independent of the state.

The second period started together after the beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidency at the beginning of 2000. This time was marked by a large army reform. The transition to a one-year compulsory service raised the prestige and popularity of the army, which, in turn, started changing the attitude towards war veterans. The state slowly regained its monopoly on coercion, the period of mafia gangs and shoot-outs between them ended, and the veterans stopped appearing on the news bulletins, which changed the way they were viewed by the public.

At the end of the decade, an active campaign of patriotic mobilization and militarization started. It ultimately changed the attitude towards both serving soldiers and veterans. From dangerous people with post-traumatic syndrome and a criminal past, they started turning into fearless warriors who risked their lives for the benefit of all society. When in 2001 the state adopted the first Russian Patriotic Education Programme (there have been four of them in total so far) veterans appeared in it as teachers of "patriotic education" classes, coaches of paramilitary camps and firearms instructors. Veterans' organizations started to participate in government activities; most of them changed their statutes, making their main goal not to help the members but to fulfil the goals of the state's militaristic propaganda. Since the end of the 2000s, the statutes claimed that if veterans did not work enough, their membership could be revoked. Veterans welcomed these shifts in political discourse and revisited their past in favour of a more heroic one. They also accepted the fact that from now on, to maintain the title of a veteran (and not getting anything on a practical level), they had to continue their service to the state and demonstrate their loyalty.

The third period started in the early 2010s. The militarization of the political system continued and caused changes in the state attitude to the Afghan war. I claim that from the middle of the 2010s, former soldiers have been used as a tool for organizing pro-government rallies and supporting state initiatives. They have received state permission for the regular and legal show of force. Threatening the political opposition, suppressing protests and showing that any public activities which run counter to the state politic of patriotic mobilization would be punished, veterans' organizations transformed into a new state power structure and contributed to the overall institutionalization of violence. By supporting and funding veterans' organizations, the state gained a new loyal and united force that could be used for both propaganda and enforcement goals.

On top of that, veteran alliances began recruiting their members for military action. In 2014, groups of Afghan veterans from the European part of Russia, mobilized by the heads of regional military unions, were sent to Crimea; later, large groups of veterans voluntarily (but with the assistance of veterans' unions) went to Donbass, then joined private PMCs in Syria (I discuss this in chapters 1 and 2, citing the testimonies of my informants). Veterans' unions started to work as recruitment agencies, finding military or paramilitary jobs for their members.

The state continued to build a new discourse of patriotic mobilization and militarization. The military resolution of conflicts started being discussed as possible. The new state narrative draws on a sequence of wars, from the Great Patriotic War to the Afghan and Chechen wars, and then Syria. The veterans of all these wars are now considered equal. While being interviewed in 2019, ex-soldiers who served in Afghanistan called themselves "younger brothers" of participants of the Great Patriotic War, who took over the baton of heroism and masculinity. They claimed that, when their generation will pass away, veterans of the Chechen wars will come next as role models for the generations to come.

Thus, a narrative that unites all of the recent wars was finally created. Since then, there have been no separate military campaigns, just continuous, never-ending war. In their patriotic

education classes, veterans, as people who had already become part of this ongoing war, promised their students that they also would be lucky enough to participate in this war in the future.

My conclusions from this initial investigation showed that from the middle of the 2000s, the Russian state has used wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya to instill patriotic sentiment and reinforce the militarization of Russian society. Veterans' alliances have been used as networks for governmental support, to spread official discourses and to unite ex-servicemen in their new role of conductors of official ideology. Patriotic education of children and adolescents, in which veterans became actively involved, also helped in routinizing violence. In general, I claim that all these activities were crucial to the generation of societal support for current and future wars.

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Now, when I am submitting my thesis, Novaya Gazeta is (hopefully temporally) closed due to a regime of military censorship in the Russian Federation; International Memorial has been named a foreign agent (much like those prosecuted during the Great Terror, whose stories Memorial revealed) and shut down by the state; the Rector of the Moscow School, Sergey Zuev is in prison, and the future of the school is in danger. In my research proposal, I claimed that it was difficult to work on my topic in Russia. Since then, it has become impossible. I count myself remarkably privileged to have had the opportunity to study a topic that is banned in my home country. I hope I can continue doing my best to study it further.

### **Note on Transliteration and Conventions**

The transcription system used from Cyrillic is British Standard (BS 2979: 1958, as modified in Oxford Slavonic Papers). Exceptions have been made for proper names such as Boris Yeltsin, which are given in the form most familiar to English-speaking readers.

I do not italicize Russian terms like “afgantsy” and “chechentsy”, widely used in scholarly works. I try to relate to them like to “naturalized” Russian words such as “perestroika”, particularly because I try to explore the world view of these groups, rather than to exoticize it.

At the same time, I use italics for the names of the groups, some of which (e.g. *Rostov band*) are toponyms or other terms that could become confused with, for instance, the city itself.

## Introduction



**Figure 1.** A wedding in the town of Horlivka in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, June 2014.<sup>1</sup>

Six years ago, under the scorching southern summer sun, I was driving through wheat and sunflower fields in the part of the Donbass occupied by the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). As a journalist, I was covering the war waged by undercover Russian troops together with Russia-supported armed volunteer militias. I was interviewing militiamen on the demarcation line between territory held by Ukrainian government forces and DNR and was spending nights in bomb shelters and local homes. In one of those homes, in the village of Makiivka not far from the frontline, a wall was covered with flags of DPR, Russia and Russian Airborne Forces, and on an armchair lay a uniform tunic covered with medals. My hosts, a couple in their 50s, had met each other on the frontline, where they both were fighting voluntarily, he as a mortarman and she as a sniper. They had got married in their platoon: in camouflage uniforms and with grenade rings instead of wedding ones, now put in a glass case

<sup>1</sup> "Ukraine: Wedding Photos Reveal Weapons Culture", *BBC*, 20 June 2014. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-27940551>>, accessed 22 May 2022.

with an Orthodox icon. The wife told me that they were very happy in their marriage. Although sometimes, even when sober, but stressed out, her husband would take her for a Ukrainian spy and threaten to turn her in to the MGB DNR. She said she'd got used to it and didn't take it personally. As for her husband, it was his fourth war, after Afghanistan, where he'd been stationed at 18 as a conscript of the Soviet army, Nagorno Karabakh, and Chechnya, where he'd served as a career soldier. I asked him what side he'd fought on in Karabakh, the Armenian or Azerbaijani one. My host made a long pause as if trying to remember. "On our side" he answered. I asked what side was "our" side. He looked puzzled. "The one that gave me the orders."

On this field trip, I met a large number of men like my host; ones fighting for the side that "gave them the orders" and who, with every fibre of their being, hated the "other side". Many of these people had already fought in Chechnya, Tajikistan, Karabakh, or other local wars waged by the USSR or modern Russia; some were old enough to have participated in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. They returned to the frontline whenever they could find one. If they survived, they came back home and continued to lead peaceful lives. But were they indeed peaceful? Of course, not many of them were as traumatized as my Donbass host; many, after fighting once, never returned to war again. Nevertheless, they were changed. I started being interested in their everyday lives between or after the wars, and questioning what they bring home from their military service: entrenched values and moral norms, a specific attitude towards violence, enemies and brothers-in-arms, specific gender norms – what else?

In general, I was interested not in the military ethos per se but in us, the civilian public, in the ways we experience the shifts in social norms, conventions and public discourses brought about by former soldiers. Hence, in my thesis, I shall focus not so much on their personal stories and the common scenarios of ex-combatants' life paths (though I also address these in the two first chapters) but rather on how the presence of a large number of people with military experience changes Russian society; which social processes it provoked; how people

accustomed to violent actions began to resort to the in peacetime; how the logic of violence became embedded in civilian life.

In my thesis, I shall try to prove that the aftermath of the wars still has a significant impact on Russian society. Many of their victims have not yet been identified; programmes of social and psychological rehabilitation for their participants do not exist.<sup>2</sup> The traumatic experience has not been overcome, and the wound, unhealed, continues to have pathological effects both for the combatants and for the whole of Russian society.

When I started working on my research, I realized that it was impossible to look at the legacies of the local wars without considering one more major factor – the role of the state. I found out that the public discourses connected with wars, their veterans, and with militarization were shaped by the state substantially, and that since the beginning of the 2000s the state had started to use veterans for fulfilling different tasks connected with patriotic mobilization of citizens and transformed military mobilization into a lasting political tendency. The veterans, for their part, had voluntarily united around the state and become pillars of the regime.

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As I was working on my thesis, the topic I chose was shifting. As the Russian invasion of Syria continued, both Russian state media and veterans' unions increasingly recalled the war in Afghanistan, comparing it to the Syrian one and arguing that in both cases the country was fighting against drug trafficking and “Islamic fundamentalism”.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, the head of the biggest state-affiliated military alliance, The Russian Union of Afghanistan Veterans (RSVA, Российский Союз Ветеранов Афганистана), asked the State Duma to introduce legislation reversing the assessment of the war in Afghanistan as unnecessary that had been put forward in

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<sup>2</sup> For more about the necessity of rehabilitation and the lack of it for ex-combatants see, for example, *Militsiya mezhdu Rossieii i Chechnei. Veterany konflikta v rossiiskom obshchestve*. Moscow: Demos, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> “Doklad predsedatelya komiteta po koordinatsii sovместnykh deistvii veteranskikh ob"edinenii geroya sovetskogo soyuza Gromova B.V. “O khodi raboty po podgotovke k 30-letiyu zaversheniya vpolneniya 40-i armiei zadach v Afganistane”, Boevoe Bratstvo web-site. <<https://bbratstvo.com/doklad-predsedatelya-komiteta-po-koordinacii-sovmestnyh-deystviy-veteranskih-obedineniy-geroya-sovetskogo-soyuza-gromova-bv>>, accessed 17 August, 2020.

the glasnost era. In 2019, Russian politicians and former servicemen criticized the movie *Leaving Afghanistan*, directed by Pavel Lungin and dedicated to the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Politicians called it unpatriotic, and former soldiers wrote to Vladimir Putin and asked him to ban the film, which they said would harm Russia's image.<sup>4</sup>

These wars, ingloriously lost, were increasingly addressed by journalists and politicians in a spirit of affirmation. In honour of them, new memorials were erected. For instance, seventy-five monuments to the paratroopers of the Sixth Company of the 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, killed in Chechnya in 2000, have been built across Russia,<sup>5</sup> and in 2020, the twentieth anniversary of the battle in which they died became a huge military festival in Moscow, Chechnya and most of the paratroopers' hometowns.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, I noticed that the narratives of my informants had changed. If in 2019, when I started my fieldwork, the former soldiers in Afghanistan talked about the veterans of the Great Patriotic War as an unattainable ideal whom they wanted to emulate, in the autumn of 2021 they already called themselves successors of the Great Patriotic War veterans and put the Second World War and the invasion of Afghanistan in the same category. The image of the enemy also began to change. If in 2019, when I asked my informants who were their enemies in the Afghan war, they described wild, exotic and uncivilized savages. In 2021, five of my informants told me that in Afghanistan, they fought the US. They also claimed that the USA had been Russia's main foe for many years, and that in all the recent wars – in Chechnya, Syria or Donbass – Russia was fighting the US too.

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<sup>4</sup> M. Bennetts, “‘Dirt and filth’: Russia Attacks Film about Red Army in Afghanistan. Portrayal of Soviet Withdrawal from Country Distorts Historical Facts, Claims Politician in Moscow”, *Guardian*, 16 April 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/16/dirt-and-filth-russia-attacks-film-about-red-army-leaving-afghanistan>>, accessed 28 April 2022.

<sup>5</sup> V. Nordvik, A. Pavlov, “Poslednyaya rota Sovetskogo Soyuza. Moskovskii biznesmen postavil 75 pamyatnikov pogibshim geroyam 6-i roty, rozhdenym v ischeznuvshei strane”, *Rodina*, 1 October 2020. <<https://rg.ru/2020/10/13/moskovskij-biznesmen-postavil-75-pamiatnikov-pogibshim-geroiam-6-j-roty.html>>, accessed 14 March 2020.

<sup>6</sup> I have discussed this in more detail in Chapter 2.

Over the years, my informants increasingly cited official state discourse, more and more often explained the outbreak of wars they were involved in by geopolitical threats, and spoke about a new war in which their experience would be needed once again, and for which they should prepare Russia's youth. I hypothesize that my informants reacted to changes in public discourses that I did not notice. It seems especially important to analyze their narratives now, after the war they predicted indeed started.

### **Timeframe and Methodology**

The time-frame of my research is from the beginning of the 1990s (after the end of the war in Afghanistan) until the present – or, more precisely, 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine and the situation changed dramatically<sup>7</sup>. I focus on the aftermath of the war in Afghanistan and two military operations in Chechnya as the latest and most violent conflicts in contemporary Russian history, and the ones that influenced the country the most.

I do not highlight military operations in Georgia (2008) and Syria (2015-2017), since I consider that they both made less impact on Russian society. The Georgian campaign lasted for as little as five days and involved, according to official information, not more than 19,000 soldiers;<sup>8</sup> while the Russian invasion in Syria engaged a lot of employees of private military companies. Besides, after coming back, people involved in these wars have not (unlike veterans of Afghan and Chechen wars) formed their own alliances or communities and have not become a noticeable group – at least, have not yet.

According to official information, as many as 620,000 armed men, mostly conscripts, and 21,000 civilians, passed through Afghanistan over the decade of the war (1979-1989). More than 15,000 soldiers died; more than 50,000 were injured; approximately 9,000 people were

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<sup>7</sup> I finished my fieldwork in October 2021 and hence was not able to look in depth at the changes which emerged after the beginning of this war.

<sup>8</sup> M. Barabanov, "The August War between Russia and Georgia", *Moscow Defense Brief*, Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, no. 3(13), 9 December 2008.

left disabled.<sup>9</sup> About 140,000 servicemen, including conscripts and special police forces, passed through the two wars in Chechnya. More than 11,000 of them died, and more than 37,000 were injured<sup>10</sup>. As Timothy Thomas and Charles O’Hara have written, all Russian society to some extent has become a victim of the fighting, in the same way that American society became a victim of the Vietnam War.<sup>11</sup>

I hypothesise that the wars changed Russian society in fundamental ways, from political and social processes down to the socialization of private citizens. Accordingly, in every chapter of my work I investigate the consequences of the wars and the homecoming of war veterans on three levels: macro (the aftermath of the wars in a political and social context, influence on social structures, public discourses), meso (institutions and organizations of war veterans) and micro (individual experiences of ex-combatants, their families and other people affected by the conflicts).

On the macro-level of my research, I consider the long-term impact of the wars and the role of the state in them: the revival of militarist ideology; the development of a new concept of patriotism; shifts in attitude to local wars; changes in the concept of masculinity; the trivialization and legitimization of violence.

On the meso-level, I look at the social structures and institutions that appeared as one of the consequences of the wars. I contend that unions organized by former combatants play an important role in producing new group identities, and hypothesize that if in the 1990s such unions were organized as grassroots projects, sometimes opposing the state, and aimed at helping veterans to obtain social security and perpetuate the memory of the fallen, at the beginning of the 2010s the biggest military unions were gradually transformed into official,

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<sup>9</sup> R. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–89*. London: Profile Books. 2012. <<https://military.wikireading.ru/63518>>, accessed 4 October 2020.

<sup>10</sup> *Rossii i SSSR v voynakh XX veka: statisticheskoe issledovanie*, Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 2001, pp. 35-536.

<sup>11</sup> T. L. Thomas, C. P. O’Hara, “Combat Stress in Chechnya”, *Voennyy meditsinskii zhurnal*, no. 4, April 1996, p. 46.

state-run organizations, involved in politics and state propaganda campaign and not very much interested in the wellbeing of their members.

On the micro-level of my research, I explore individual experiences of ex-combatants.<sup>12</sup> The political scientist Nathalie Duclos points out the “endogenous” effects of any military conflict: after it ends, individuals and communities do not revert to the status quo ante; they have been fundamentally transformed by the experience of conflict.<sup>13</sup> I shall analyze the consequences of such transformations, tracing the long-term effects of war on the political and social behaviour of former combatants; the transformations of their identities; the way they change their attitude towards the wars; their main itineraries of return to “civilian” life. The process of resocialization of ex-servicemen did not end with their homecoming. I want to understand whether, while reintegrating into the postwar framework of social, family and economic relations, war veterans brought violence to a postwar reality, “brought the war home”, as Belew writes of Vietnam war veterans’ homecoming.<sup>14</sup>

The main focus of my interest is the role of violence within the military; exposure soldiers to violence in wartime and its social consequences, which include further violence in later wars, paramilitary activities, in criminal gangs, and at home. There are two main areas of my investigation: the collective institutionalization of the veterans, and their collective and personal identities. Hence, masculinity and the link with violence (which I address in Chapter 3) is a key part of that.

I hypothesize that the war, as a traumatic event which the veterans passed through together, made them create a collective identity. Influenced by former co-servicemen (the “war brotherhood”) and veteran’s unions, they remained a part of the military total institution and

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<sup>12</sup> I focus on social and psychological factors in typical veterans and don't consider, for example, disabled ex-combatants which are well studied already.

<sup>13</sup> N. Duclos (ed.), *War veterans in postwar situations: Chechnya, Serbia, Turkey and Côte d'Ivoire*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. VIII.

<sup>14</sup> K. Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Harvard University Press, 2018.

continued to build their self-identity in compliance with the narratives accepted by their comrades-in-arms.

In all my chapters, I look at all these three levels together. I assume that propaganda, militarization or patriotic mobilization never flowed from top-to-bottom or bottom-to-top only. There have always been two-way movements. The state offered its own discourses or activities; the war veterans' community responded with its agenda, and acted according to its own interests, or following its group identity. In my first two chapters, I shall show how the interests of veterans correspond, contradict, or exist in interplay with, the interests of military unions and the state.

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Overall, I identify three periods of changes in the attitude towards the local wars within state and society and the military ethos itself. I use them to trace the process of militarization and its impact on veterans' associations and lives, and especially the growing rapprochement of the state. During the first period, which lasted throughout the 1990s, the attitude to the war in Afghanistan in Russian society was mostly negative. They were perceived as hostile, traumatized people with PTSD and struggled to find jobs. Veterans felt isolated in their communities and abandoned by the state which did not want to be associated with these lost wars and declared both Afghan and Chechen campaigns meaningless. Besides, in the 1990s the state lost its monopoly on violence and coercion, and a lot of veterans joined the new criminal organizations which completely ruined their reputation in the society.

The second period which I would like to identify, started at the beginning of the 2000s and Vladimir Putin's presidency. This time, a large army reform and an active campaign of patriotic mobilization and militarization started. It changed the attitude towards veterans and the army in general. From outcasts and criminals, as they were perceived in the 1990s, they slowly started turning into heroes. Veterans' organizations started to participate in government activities and

obliged their members to take part in patriotic education of children. Veterans welcomed these shifts in political discourse and revisited their past in favor of a more heroic one.

The third period started in the early 2010s, in the second decade of Putin's leadership, together with the escalating militarization of the political system which led to the revision of the public's attitude to the Afghan war and the use of veterans and their unions as one of the pillars of government support. During this period, former soldiers obtained state permission for the regular and legal show of force. They began to be used as a tool for supporting state initiatives and suppressing protests. Finally, veterans' organizations transformed into a new state power structure and contributed to the overall institutionalization of violence. In addition, the state continued to build a new discourse of patriotic mobilization and militarization. At the level of rhetoric, the military resolution of conflicts has become permissible; the state has effectively spread the image of a threatening external enemy. This led to the mobilization of society and the consolidation of citizens and created an image of just, continuous and never-ending war.

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Working on this thesis, I used the narrative analysis of oral history.<sup>15</sup> It analyzes not only the content of interviews or factual information but also the social context of them and the way the narratives help to construct the identities of informants; which linguistic strategies they follow. According to Richard Candida Smith, although interviews are ostensibly firsthand testimony, personal experience often dissolved into deeply rooted oral cultural forms that

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<sup>15</sup> I use theoretical works about oral history and narrative analysis written by Lutz Niethammer, Alessandro Portelli, Gabriele Rosenthal and Richard Candida Smith. L. Niethammer, *Voprosy k nemetskoipamyati: Stat'i po ustnoi istorii*, Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2012.

A. Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different" in R. Perks and A. Thomson (Eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 63–74.

G. Rosenthal, "The Narrated Life Story: On the Interrelation between Experience, Memory and Narration" in K. Milnes, C. Horrocks, N. Kelly, B. Roberts, D. Robinson (Eds.) *Narrative, Memory and Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics and Contexts*, Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2006, pp. 1–16.

R. C. Smith, "Analytic Strategies for Oral History Interviews", *Handbook of Interview Research*, London: Sage Publications, 2019, pp.711-732.

provided a ready set of stereotypes for structuring memories and filling them with meaning. The past often disappears into a narrative structure of plot turns and recurrent symbolic motifs that embeds speakers in a particular discursive community.<sup>16</sup>

Analyzing my interviews, I was interested less in events or deeds from my informants' lives than in the meaning of those events and deeds for them and the way they talk of them. How do my informants build their narratives, what do they consider important and what do they not want to discuss? When do they use clichés or narrative structures borrowed from official discourse? For instance, why, talking about their military experience in Afghanistan, do my informants employ the tropes of recent mass media coverage, for instance, of the invasion in Syria? What are the paradigmatic elements of their speech and what narrative forms and plots are present in all my interviews? For example, every informant told me at least one story of a soldier, saved by his brother-in-arms. Sometimes an informant could play one of these roles; more often both of the actors were other people. Nevertheless, however narrated, a story of battle brotherhood became a benchmark of human relations – I highlight this process in Chapter 3.

### **Sources and Fieldwork**

In my analysis of these shifting attitudes to war and veterans in Russian society, I use two main types of sources. The first one is official governmental regulations (for example, the various state programmes for the “Patriotic Education of the Citizens of the Russian Federation”) together with official documents of veterans’ organizations such as statutes, handbooks, the texts of public talks and speeches given by their leaders, and news from their official websites. These documents show the dynamic of changes in the engagement of the veterans with the state alongside changes in the veterans’ approach towards their role in society.

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<sup>16</sup> R. C. Smith, “Analytic Strategies for Oral History Interviews”, *Handbook of Interview Research*, London: Sage Publications, 2019, p.713.

For example, different editions of statutes clearly demonstrate the evolution of the roles that veterans' organizations choose for themselves and, at the same time, changes in the self-identity of ex-soldiers and their attitude towards their military past. Moreover, I use transcripts of public speeches of Russian highest officials and their articles and memoirs about the local wars and patriotism to show how the official discourse of the wars has been evolving, and how the state perception of the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya have transformed from lost and shameful into just and victorious.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 2.** Students of School 21 in the city of Noginsk during a paramilitary show for relatives of soldiers fallen in the wars in Chechnya.<sup>18</sup>

Besides these official sources, I use a number of oral interviews with war veterans, heads of military unions, and directors of military museums. Even though the military conflicts I want to study are decades away from now, the oral history method makes it possible to come very

<sup>17</sup> I write about this in Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>18</sup> The photo was taken during my fieldwork in Moscow region in September 2021.

close to their participants and provides an opportunity to reflect in a new way on the past. I hope the individual narratives of my informants will evolve into what historian Lutz Niethammer called a “latent structure of meaning”.<sup>19</sup> Such structures partly reveal collective conditions of existence and the underlying individuality of experiences and show “thought patterns that have internal consistency and historical specificity”. The absence of an in-depth retrospective analysis of the wars means there is no conventional framework that otherwise would shape the memories of ex-servicemen. Besides, most of my informants (with very few exceptions, which mostly include public figures and heads of military unions) have never been interviewed before and often constructed for the first time their identities through their oral narratives while talking to me. That is one of the main advantages of this type of source. Given my emphasis on the evolution of attitudes to the past, a characteristic of oral testimony which is often taken as a minus – that it is inevitably transformed by present experience – becomes a positive advantage.

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In total, I conducted 63 interviews.<sup>20</sup> In my thesis, I have used 26 of them. Some of the interviews were less relevant for my needs here. After several interviews with them, I decided to avoid professional soldiers of fortune, considering their experience exceptional and not particularly relevant to my research. In addition, a group of interviews conducted recently and dedicated to the creation of military museums and monuments, will be used in future research, though the information in them has informed the background knowledge upon which I draw here. All my interviews were semi-structured and consisted of two parts. In the first one, I briefly asked informants about their military service in Afghanistan or Chechnya, including how they became soldiers and what they had known about this war before they were

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<sup>19</sup> L. Niethammer, *Voprosy k nemetskoj pamyati*, p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> For my research, I have been granted ethical approval from the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (the reference number is R67375/RE001). I was allowed to obtain oral consent of my informants. In my questionnaire, I am leaning on ethical guidelines of the British Oral History Society.

conscripted. I tried not to ask for details of their service experience, in order to avoid retraumatizing the informants. Despite this, most of the veterans voluntarily started sharing their military experiences with me. Many of them told me that they had never talked about their military service before. Not having access to psychotherapy or any psychological support, they were afraid to share their disturbing or cruel recollections with their families. Many of my informants were frank enough to share the most painful or traumatic episodes from their military service. I still remember Ahmed from Makhachkala, who told me how once in Afghanistan, he, aged 19 and a conscript, threw a grenade into a local hut, expecting an enemy might be hidden there. When he entered the hut, he found a woman with her five children, all killed by him. Ahmed said that he vividly remembered every detail of that hut and that he was now rebuilding his life, always with this scene in his head. Since then, he had participated in four other military campaigns. Just like the paramilitaries whom I met in Ukrainian Donbass, some of my informants returned to the frontlines again and again.

In the second part of my interviews, the more important for me, which usually lasted longer, I asked my informants about their lives after the end of their service: how they felt after coming back home; what the attitude towards them in society was and how it had been changing; what they thought of official discourses about the wars; to what extent they participated in veterans' organizations and the patriotic education of children. I asked about their family life and post-war itineraries; their involvement in paramilitary groups and mafia gangs of the 1990s (surprisingly, my informants often talked of their criminal past voluntarily and even with some pride); about the ways they remember their service and how they commemorate it. This part of my interviews allowed me to reconstruct some elements of my informants' self- and group identity, collective memory and military ethos.

I started my fieldwork in the summer of 2019. In total, I visited six Russian regions: Moscow and Moscow region (city of Odintsovo), Tver, Bryansk, Yekaterinburg and Sverdlovsk region (city of Nizhniy Tagil), Chelyabinsk and a large number of cities and villages

in the republic of Dagestan. All of these places have large communities of veterans and highly visible organizations for them. Besides, they are located in different Russian administrative district which gives geographical representativeness to my study.

Yekaterinburg became an important place for my fieldwork due to the significance of its veterans' community for the history of the city and the veterans' movement in general. At the beginning of the 1990s, the city became a centre of organized crime. A rise in visible crime was then widespread in large Russian cities, but Yekaterinburg still stood out, with drug trafficking and armed mobsters blatant in their activities. Notorious "Afghan gangs" terrorized the entire city. In 1992, when local veterans found out that the flats they were supposed to receive as part of their social benefits had been put on sale, more than 700 members of the Sverdlovsk Regional Branch of the Union of Afghan Veterans seized two buildings with more than 400 flats. They held the houses for two months until the authorities acknowledged that they could stay there. As a participant in the seizure, my informant Dmitri, told me, after this, the whole city, including children, was afraid of the veterans: "*Дети из соседних дворов к нам на детскую площадку не приходили*".<sup>21</sup> In two local cemeteries (Shirokorechenskoe and Severnoe), it is still possible to find a lot of bizarre, elaborate and ostentatious gravestones commemorating members of the "Afghan mafia". One of them, Victor Kasintsev, killed in 1994 by members of another gang, is buried together with his two bodyguards, also war veterans, whom he was gunned down with.

At the same time, Yekaterinburg became a centre of different grassroots veterans' organizations. Already in 1984, a local Pedagogical University had set up a special faculty for preparing teachers of pre-military instruction and physical training. The majority of its students were Afghan veterans, and for more than a decade, the faculty became a sort of a self-help organization that united veterans and helped them in adapting to civilian life. Nothing comparable existed in other regions. In 1994, students of the faculty opened a small Museum of the Afghan War, the first one in the country. Since the middle of the 1990s, a commercial

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 1 of this thesis.

company, Taganskiy Ryad, which received its name from the big shopping centre in Yekaterinburg, run by afgantsy, started providing social security for disabled veterans and families of fallen local soldiers. According to my interviews with local informants, the company is still doing it and continued sponsoring veterans' families even during the Covid-19 pandemic when the shopping centre was closed for many months.

Nizhniy Tagil is the only city I identified that has a strong organization that provides all types of social security for veterans, from medical equipment (like prostheses and wheelchairs) to kit for outdoor activities (like tents and kayaks). Besides, it offers veterans a counseling service – the only one I found in Russia. The organization was started as a grassroots project in the 1990s but became state-run in the 2010s. In Chapter 1 I describe the mechanism for such appropriation.

In Tver, a large city in 180 km from Moscow, I interviewed members of a local veterans' union who had repeatedly been brought to the capital and trained on how to suppress political protests and disperse oppositional rallies. I was interested in interviewing ex-combatants from Dagestan due to their protests against the non-payment of veterans' social security benefits.

In September 2019, more than 40 veterans of the war in Afghanistan from all parts of Dagestan gathered in the Park of Soldiers-Internationalists in Makhachkala, set up tents and went on hunger strike. They demanded social benefits and the flats they were supposed to receive under the Veterans' Law.<sup>22</sup> Several of the strikers ended up in hospitals but, as they told me, did not achieve anything. Their interviews were among the most critical towards the contemporary Russian authorities. At the same time, even people who were ready to protest for their benefits on the streets told me the same narrative about patriotism, support for the country and a necessity to prepare children at schools for future wars.

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<sup>22</sup> Mostly, it is free housing, pensions and free medical care. See Federal'nyi zakon ot 12.01.1995 N 5-FZ (red. ot 26.03.2022) "O veteranakh", <<https://legalacts.ru/doc/federalnyi-zakon-ot-12011995-n-5-fz-o/>>, accessed 18 May 2022.



**Figure 3.** Hunger strike by veterans of the Afghan war in Makhachkala.<sup>23</sup>

I choose Bryansk as the only city in Russia where a local branch of a big military union had organized an anti-war rally. In September 2014, during the war in southeast Ukraine, about a dozen Afghan veterans gathered in a central city square holding anti-war slogans. Later they were harassed for this by both the local authorities and the heads of the military union. In Chapter 1 I shall discuss in detail how under Putin's regime veterans' organizations evolved into a pillar of government support, and how ex-soldiers' loyalty became a valuable asset for the state's legitimacy. The members of the Bryansk military union, whom I interviewed, became the only exception, and their protests caused a division inside the local veterans' community.

<sup>23</sup> "Glava 'Boevogo bratstva' Dagestana vstretilsya s veteranami afganskoi voyny, kotorye provodyat zabastovku", Boevoe Bratstvo website, 9 October 2019. <<https://bbratstvo.com/2019/10/09/glava-boevogo-bratstva-dagestana-vstretilsya-s-veteranami-afganskoy-voyny-kotorye-provodyat-zabastovku>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

Another reason for my focus on this field site is that I was lucky enough to find and interview Bryansk veterans who were deployed to Crimea in spring 2014 to participate in the process of its occupation and annexation.

In Moscow, I have not obtained access to the leaders of big federal veterans' unions, but I was able to interview leaders of small ones, opened in different districts of the city, and heads of museums dedicated to the local wars (one of them is located in the Moscow outskirts at Perovo, the second one in the town of Odintsovo, not far from the capital). All of them had been involved with the veterans' movement since the start, and were rather sceptical about the current attempts to unify it nationwide. Since the 2000s, the museum in Perovo, opened by the community of veterans, has been under the control of the Ministry of Culture, like all other museums in the city. Its founder, a former Afghan soldier, met me at the doors of the museum and apologize, saying that he would talk to me later because of an ongoing online meeting with the heads of the Ministry, whom he briefly described in several obscene words. The only censored epithet among them was "corrupt". Later, the director willingly told me how much money had been stolen from the city budget in his museum alone. Despite this, though, he fully supported the current president, federal authorities and Russian foreign policy.

My fieldwork in Chelyabinsk almost failed due to a reason which I was not able to foresee. I arrived in the city at the weekend when the federal and local elections were being held. Most of my potential informants, leaders of veterans' alliances turned out to be observers at these elections. They were monitoring them as members of the governing party United Russia and did not have time to meet me. In our phone conversations, they sounded like busy governmental officials and not leaders of humanitarian organizations. Nevertheless, my fieldwork failure implicitly confirmed my hypothesis about the convergence of military alliances and the state.

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During my fieldwork, I found three criteria for potential informants (apart from their being ex-combatants who had participated in the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya). They should

willingly self-identify as “veterans”, be affiliated with ex-soldiers alliances, local or federal, and should have participated in commemorative practices connected with the local wars. My goal was to find ex-combatants who had preserved their military identity and considered their war experience important for them. I wanted to look at how their views and perceptions and personal or collective (together with their brothers-in-arms) memory had been influenced by state discourses and how they had reacted to changes in the official ideology and agenda of veterans’ unions.

I used snowball sampling mostly, usually finding a familiar person in the veterans’ community and then interviewing his peers. The snowball method is widely used in Russia because of trust issues. In most cases, without a link to someone familiar veterans would have refused to talk to me.

Perhaps most strikingly, almost all of my informants (with just one exception, the organizer of the anti-war rally in Bryansk) were loyal to the government and the Russian army; supported the annexation of Crimea, the war in the Ukrainian South-East in 2014 and the Russian invasion of Syria; shared the perception of Russia as a besieged fortress and the US and NATO as enemies, and if not actively participating in state-run activities like “patriotic education” of children, fully supported them. At first, I decided that my (snowball) sampling was not representative enough. However, while in Bryansk, I asked my informant, a former organizer of the anti-war rally, to help me in finding informants supporting anti-war views or at least less militaristic, but it turned out that since 2014, when the rally was held, even those few veterans who had participated in it had changed their political position. Thus, I can reasonably claim that my informants represent a group that is homogenous, if not always cohesive, and shares the views and concepts on which I focus in my discussion.

## Outline

My thesis consists of four interconnected chapters, arranged thematically. The first one is focused on the discursive, political and social shifts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and relations between ex-soldiers, veterans' alliances, society and the state throughout this period. On the macro-level, I trace the shifts in the state discourse connected with recent military campaigns, from a complete disregard for them in the 1990s to the wave of militarization and patriotic mobilization that started in the 2000s and produced a new image of just and victorious wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya and their participants as united, heroic and ready for self-sacrifice. On the meso-level, I look at the creation and evolution of veterans' unions from grassroots alliances (often established in opposition to the state or as criminal gangs, and aimed at self-help and support) to big ideological institutions, dependent on the state and offering support to governmental initiatives. The role of their members has also changed. They are now obliged to participate in "patriotic" activities or not to be considered veterans anymore. I claim that most of the veterans preserved their military identity and felt undervalued and humiliated by the state in the 1990s and hence welcomed the new military discourse that proclaimed them as defenders of the homeland. It strengthened their loyalty to the state and made them more united.

My aim in this chapter is to trace the roots of veterans' loyalty to the state, to show changes in their self-identity and mass perception, and to describe how ex-soldiers are becoming one of the drivers for the Russian state.

Building upon the findings from the first chapter, in the second one I continue tracing changes in state-veterans relations, but take the war in Chechnya as a case study. I compare the two Chechen wars in terms of public perception, media coverage and official narratives and claim that, during the first one, the death of young draftees and large-scale marches of the Committees of the Soldiers Mother to the city of Grozny, widely acknowledged by the mass media, determined the attitude of society towards this war as bloody, shameful and senseless.

The war created resentment against mass conscription and seriously damaged the image of the army.

The second Chechen war also started with media reports about the exceptional brutality of the troops and mass violation of human rights. However, the situation soon radically changed: state agencies managed to take control of media coverage and implement an information blockade.

At the beginning of the 2000s, state actors started creating a new official discourse on the Chechen wars. In it, propaganda merged both the wars into one narrative of military feats, bravery, the self-sacrifice of soldiers and the unity of brothers-in-arms. The main symbol of this war and military heroism in general became the paratroopers of the Sixth Company of the 76th Airborne Division, killed in Chechnya, a myth that was completely detached from the real story.

I shall also analyze attitudes towards former Chechen soldiers who, after coming home, experienced the same social stigmatization and abandonment by the state as Afghan veterans a decade before, and who had the same feelings of resentment.

The third chapter of my thesis is focused on the legacies of local wars. I look at the ways in which the military ethos penetrates postwar life, and how war veterans are "bringing the war home" (like the veterans of the Vietnam war did previously). My analysis focuses in particular on gender norms and the concept of masculinity in post-war society and how they were shaped by the wars. I argue that army service has been crucial for shaping male identity. Ex-soldiers firmly believe that a military man is the only real man and consider military service the only proper method of male initiation. Masculinity, which traditionally has been "a prominent component of military culture",<sup>24</sup> forms the identity of soldiers and does not change after the demobilization of ex-combatants. Moreover, the militarization of the 2010s made this masculine image more widespread and a more widely accepted norm. In my thesis, I shall trace

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<sup>24</sup> L. Cooper, N. Caddick, L. Godier, 'Transition from the Military into Civilian Life: an Exploration of Cultural Competence', *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2018, p. 159.

a number of features that a “real man”, in the view of veterans, must have. For example, counter-intuitively, he must not be proactive, but should follow orders and a military hierarchy, be ready to obey and blindly support the official ideology.

I shall also examine the relation of ex-soldiers to violence and the way how violent behaviour became a legitimate and integral daily practice, devoid of moral reflections. Besides, I will trace how for servicemen the war became an “every day job”, a normalized practice whose main goal is not military victory but the maturation and survival of soldiers and their comrades-in-arms in extreme circumstances. I claim that the concept of war as a routine job and a way of male initiation was aimed at hiding the ideological vacuum of the local wars.

If in the third chapter of my research I trace how veterans of the local wars are changing social conventions, in the fourth one I show one of the ways in which they use to influence society on a practical level. I examine the role of veterans in the implementation of the state programmes of Patriotic Education. The first of such programmes (there were four in total) aimed at children and adolescents was created in 2001, shortly after Putin's coming to power. It had a militaristic character (some academics claim that militarism is an integral component of what is called "patriotic education"<sup>25</sup>), was centered upon uniting citizens around the army as a source of patriotic pride and to elaborate a new state ideology that should have substituted the old Soviet one. The programmes involved veterans of local wars as an integral part of patriotic events and classes for children. Every new five-year-long programme was designed to increase the participation of veterans; the last one, the programme for 2016-2020, repeatedly claimed the necessity to “increase the activity of veteran organizations in working with young people”.<sup>26</sup>

In this chapter, I analyze the texts of the programmes and the ways the military unions participate in their implementation. Alongside this, I look at the ex-combatants' alliances that

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<sup>25</sup> A. Rapoport, ‘Patriotic education in Russia: Stylistic move or the sign of substantive counter-reform?’ *The Educational Forum*, no. 73(2), 2009, p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii na 2016-2020 gg.* <<http://ivo.garant.ru/#/document/71296398>>, accessed 20 July 2019.

were established in the 2000s by the state precisely for “patriotic” work with children and adolescents, and changes in the statutes and activities of older grassroots alliances. I claim that at the beginning of the 2000s, they were taken under total state control and used for patriotic activities mostly.

On top of that, I concentrate on changes in the discourses of veterans' organizations and show how from the mourning of the fallen they start building the discourse of the glory of the winners. I also argue that the heroic discourse of the Great Patriotic War (i.e. Second World War) since the beginning of the 2010s was applied to all other military campaigns, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the wars in Chechnya and Syria.

In the conclusion, I examine the potential role of veterans' alliances in the 2022 war against Ukraine. I also consider the relationship between my findings and questions relating to the demobilization of veterans and its social impact in a broad sense, and several opportunities for future research.

### **Historiography**

My analysis of empirical materials is informed, throughout the discussion, by consideration of published work on the nature and history of violence, detailed study of which goes back at least three decades.<sup>27</sup> Literature on violence in Soviet and Russian history has also begun to appear recently.<sup>28</sup> However, there are still very few studies focused on the consequences of conflicts on the territory of the former USSR. In order to construct a general analytical

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<sup>27</sup> For example, E. Straub, *The Roots of Evil. The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; C. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 11 and the Final Solution in Poland*, London: Penguin Books, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> For example, J. Sandborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905–1925*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002; D. R Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009; J. Behrends, *The Return to War and Violence. Case Studies on the USSR, Russia and Yugoslavia, 1979-2014*, London, New York: Routledge, 2017; J. Behrens, ‘War, Violence, and the Military during Late Socialism and Transition. Five Case Studies on the USSR, Russia, and Yugoslavia’, *Nationalities Papers*, no. 43(5), 2015, pp. 667-681; V.A. Tishkov, *Obshchestvo v vooruzhennom konflikte (etnografiia chechenskoi voiny)*, Moscow: Nauka, 2001.

framework, I lean on publications about the legacies of military conflict and the return home of ex-combatants<sup>29</sup> and the creation of paramilitary organizations with former combatants as participants.<sup>30</sup> Studies of legacies of the Vietnam War<sup>31</sup> have proved particularly fruitful for comparative purposes. For example, in her book *Bring The War Home*, Kathleen Belew makes an argument that wars are not neatly contained in the space and time legitimated by the state. They reverberate in other terrains, last long past armistice, and often come home in ways bloody and unexpected.<sup>32</sup> Yet despite its similarities with the war in Afghanistan (a large number of casualties among both the soldiers and civilians; the negative attitude of the public towards the war and its veterans and so on), the Vietnam war was in certain respects markedly different in its effects. Soldiers of the Vietnam War brought violence to their home cities, just like veterans of Afghanistan in the 1990s. However, Vietnam War veterans considered the state their enemy and formed armed groups that opposed it. On the contrary, Soviet veterans were loyal to the state from the very beginning and gradually became more and more dependent upon and subordinate to it.<sup>33</sup>

Among the large number of historical works devoted to the establishment and development of the Soviet and Russian armies,<sup>34</sup> there were several that stand the test of time. Among them is Ellen Jones' *Red Army and Society*, the first study of the Soviet Armed Forces, published in 1985. It identifies the characteristics that were unique for the Red Army, compares the Red

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<sup>29</sup> A comparative study of the outcomes of veterans in eight different countries: M. Crotty, N. J. Diamant, M. Edele (eds.), *The Politics of Veteran Benefits in the Twentieth Century, a Comparative History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. A research on coming home to the US of veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan wars: A. Glantz, *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle against America's Veterans*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> M. Galeotti, *Russian Security and Paramilitary Forces since 1991*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> For example, K. Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Harvard University Press, 2018. A comparative study: N. Danilova, 'Konstruirovaniye voennogo sindroma: sravnitel'nyi analiz "v'etnamskogo" i "afganskogo" sindromov', *Peace and War: Cultural Contexts of Social Aggression*, Moscow: IVI RAN, 2005, pp. 231-248.

<sup>32</sup> Belew, *Bring the War Home*, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> I shall address this topic in Chapter 1.

<sup>34</sup> For example, T. J. Colton, T. Gustafson (eds.), *Soldiers and the Soviet State Civil-Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990; and Behrends, "War, Violence, and the Military during Late Socialism and Transition."

Army with its foreign counterparts, gives a history of civil-military relations, and discusses mechanisms of socialization within the armed forces, conscription policy, gender roles and stereotypes within the army. All of this I found particularly useful for my research.<sup>35</sup>

Besides, I used some historical research on the Soviet invasion of Afghan,<sup>36</sup> which gave me a general idea of this military conflict and helped to compile a questionnaire for my informants. Among the existing historiography, I would like to single out the monograph about the impact of the Afghan War on Soviet and Russian society written by Mark Galeotti and published in 1995. Particularly useful is Galeotti's chapter about first afgangtsy<sup>37</sup> unions, a subject which had never been studied before and has received no detailed attention since.

While the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya have been researched quite thoroughly in themselves, what happened to veterans of these wars has received far less attention. The same was for many years also true of the soldiers fighting in the Great Patriotic War, who also remained on the periphery of researchers' attention for a long time. In 2008, this gap was filled by Mark Edele and his detailed historical research on Great Patriotic War veterans' return to the USSR.<sup>38</sup> Mark Edele also studied the history of the first Soviet military unions and their struggle for independence. The archival data found by Edele is also of use in tracing the background of the 1980-1990s military unions' establishment.

Following Galeotti's and Edele's research, several other scholars addressed the history of the veterans' movement in the USSR,<sup>39</sup> and contemporary veterans' alliances based on the

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<sup>35</sup> E. Jones, *Red Army and Society*, Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example: R. Braithwaite, *Afgangtsy: The Russians in Afghanistan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; G. Feifer, *The Great Gamble: the Soviet War in Afghanistan*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> The Russian word afgangtsy as a notion of Afghan veterans as a joint group was first used by Mark Galeotti in his book, mentioned below.

<sup>38</sup> M. Edele, 'Soviet Veterans as an Entitlement Group, 1945-1955', *Slavic Review*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2006, pp. 111-137; M. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example: R. Dale, 'Rats and Resentment; the Demobilization of the Red Army in Post-War Leningrad, 1945-1950', *Journal of Contemporary History*, no. 45, 2010, pp.113-133; Y. Ro'i, 'The Varied Reintegration of Afghan War Veterans in Their Home Society', *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015, p. 19-56.

territory of the former USSR. One of the most important studies of how military experience and identity were constructed and represented in veterans' post-war lives was written by anthropologist Serguei Oushakine.<sup>40</sup> However, his research focused on the soldiers of the Chechen wars only. Also, his interviews were collected at the beginning of the 2000s. Oushakine's main argument that ex-combatants framed their war past in terms of a business exchange with the state<sup>41</sup> (which substantially influenced other researchers) can be applied for the community of afgantsy also. Nevertheless, I claim that this argument was relevant for the 1990s and the 2000s mostly, and that the relations of the state and veterans have changed significantly since then.

If Oushakine mainly adopts a community-based approach, the sociologist Natalia Danilova combines attention to institutions and to social practices; her long-standing, in-depth studies address the social policy of the Russian army as well as gender stereotypes and the collective memory of local wars.<sup>42</sup> I cite her while talking about the financial and legal aspects of veterans' welfare and perceptions of masculinity among ex-combatants. However, Danilova's research

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<sup>40</sup> S. Oushakine, 'Exchange of Sacrifices: Symbolizing an Unpopular War in Post-Soviet Russia', *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War across the Disciplines*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012; S. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009; S. Oushakine, 'The Politics of Pity: Domesticating Loss in a Russian Province', *American Anthropologist*, no. 108(2), 2006, pp. 297-311.

<sup>41</sup> Oushakine, 'Exchange of Sacrifices', p. 188.

<sup>42</sup> For research on veterans' welfare and selected articles and a book focused on memory of the wars see N. Danilova, 'Kollektivnye deistviya uchastnikov voyny v Afganistane v kontekste sotsial'noi politiki', PhD thesis, Saratov State University, Saratov, 2004. <<https://www.dissercat.com/content/kollektivnye-deistviya-uchastnikov-voyny-v-afganistane-v-kontekste-sotsialnoi-politiki>>, accessed 17 June, 2020; N. Danilova, *The Politics of War Commemoration in the UK and Russia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; N. Danilova, 'Voennosluzhashchie, voyny-internatsionalisty, veterany: Dinamika pravovogo statusa, 1980-2000', *Sociologicheskie issledovania*, no. 10. 2001, pp. 77-85; N. Danilova, 'Memorial'naia versii afganskoi voyny v Rossii', *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas*, vol. 40/41, no. 2/3, 2005, pp. 149-161; N. Danilova, 'Veterans' Policy in Russia: a Puzzle of Creation', *The Journal of Power Institutions*, no. 6/7, 2007; N. Danilova, 'The Development of an Exclusive Veterans' Policy: The Case of Russia', *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 20, no. 10, 2009, pp. 890-916; N. Danilova, 'Victory Day: Rituals and Practices of War Commemoration', *Russia's New Fin de Siècle*. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2013, pp. 131-152; N. Danilova, 'Victims and Heroes. Commemorating the Russian Military Casualties in the Chechen Conflicts', *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2014, pp. 58-75.

is concentrated on the legal and administrative aspects of the state-army relationships and not the military ethos or veterans' alliances which are the main focuses of my attention.<sup>43</sup>

One of the most holistic, detailed and multifaceted study on how post-Soviet states and society have addressed the consequences of the war in Afghanistan is a special issue of the *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* called "Back from Afghanistan: The Experience of Soviet Afghan War Veterans".<sup>44</sup> It addresses different strategies used for reintegration of ex-combatants into society in several post-Soviet countries. Besides, it analyzes contradictions between the soldiers' self-perceptions, post-war experiences, and the changes faced by the veterans in the new social settings.<sup>45</sup> I found particularly useful an article written by the historian Michael Galbas<sup>46</sup> addressing the development of the relationship between state institutions and Afghan veterans' associations. He also considers the transformation of the veterans' self-image in post-Soviet Russia. However, I attempt to study relations between the state and the veterans as a part of the process of ongoing militarization, and, unlike Galbas, am more focused on their connection with changes in the official state discourse.

Among studies on the consequences of the local wars, most claim that soldiers bring violence with them from the frontlines to their societies. Sociologists Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski and Anna Le Huerou make the opposite argument. Studying the legacies of the war in Chechnya, the researchers find a "complex spiral of brutalization". They claim that the war experience is transposed into episodes of postwar violence, but that is only the start. In societies

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<sup>43</sup> Natalia Danilova also contributed to a corpus of studies of disabled war veterans. See, for example N. Danilova, 'Situatsiya ogranicheniya prav cheloveka: problem izmereniya (na primere veteranov-invalidov)', *Protection of Human Rights in the Modern World*, Conference Papers. St. Petersburg: Petropolis, 2001, pp. 25-37; N. Danilova, 'Transformatsiya muzhestvennosti v proektivnoii real'noi kar'ere invalidavoiny', *Gendernie issledovania*, no. 6, 2001, pp. 259-270; N. Danilova, 'Geroi v bor'be za svoi prava: Dvizhenie invalidov voin v Sovetskom Souze i Rossii', *Obshchestvennye dvizhenia v Rossii: tochki rosta, kamni pretknovenia*, Moscow: OOO 'Variant', 2009, pp. 59-82;

<sup>44</sup> F. Ackerman, M. Galbas (ed.), *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> M. Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory": Strategies of Legitimization and Fictionalization of the Soviet-Afghan War in the Russian Federation', *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015, pp. 91-132.

where government policies implicitly or explicitly authorize violence, the pre-war lives of soldiers are also shaped by that violence. In the case of the wars in Chechnya, military personnel brought violence to the frontlines and then brought it home.<sup>47</sup> I draw on the article of Le Huerou and Sieca-Kozlowski in my chapter about the war in Chechnya. I also assume that their argument is relevant to other military campaigns too.

Research on the movement of Soldiers' Mothers is also worth mentioning here. In the 1990s, this group of women, going to the military zone to find their missing or killed sons, determined the attitude towards the first Chechen war.<sup>48</sup> Despite a large number of media publications about this unique phenomenon, it is still insufficiently studied by academics. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 2000s several articles were finally published.<sup>49</sup> Their authors use the movement as a prism, allowing them to look at Russian society, gender roles in the 1990s-2000s, and at the first Chechen war (which is relevant to my research). I was lucky enough to interview the head of The Union of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, Valentina Melnikova, in August 2019. I use her recollections and quote her arguments in three first chapters of my work.

Another possible prism through which one can view the wars and their consequences is Russian popular culture. In my work, I use Galina Zvereva's articles on the image of the Chechen wars in Russian cinema.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, in my own research I focus on oral

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<sup>47</sup> A. Le Huerou, E. Sieca-Kozlowski, 'A "Chechen Syndrome"? Russian Veterans of the Chechen War and the Transposition of War Violence to Society', *War Veterans in Postwar Situations: Chechnya, Serbia, Turkey, and Côte d'Ivoire*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 25, 46.

<sup>48</sup> I discuss this in the Chapter 2.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example: N. Danilova, 'Pravo materi soldata: Instinct zaboty ili grazhdanskii dolg in S. Oushakine, (ed.), *Semeinye uzy*. Moscow: NLO, 2004, pp. 188-210; E. M. Hinterhuber, 'Between Neotraditionalism and New Resistance-Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg', *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, vol. 19, no.1, 2001, pp. 139-152; S. Oushakine, 'Vmesto utraty: materializatsiya pamyati i germenevtika boli v provintsial'noi Rossii', *Ab Imperio*, vol.2, 2004, pp.603-639.

<sup>50</sup> G. Zvereva, 'Chechenskaya voina v diskursakh massovoi kul'tury Rossii: formy reprezentatsii vruga', *Obraz vruga*, Moscow: OGI, 2005, pp. 302-335; G. Zvereva, "'Rabota dlya muzhchin'? Chechenskaya voina v massovom kino Rossii'", *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, vol.6, 2002, <<http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2002/6/zver.html>>, accessed 21 December 2021.

interviews, official state documents and occasionally memoirs<sup>51</sup> and not on narratives provided by cinema or fiction (though this is a wide, interesting and understudied field).

The recent book by Marlène Laruelle *Is Russia Fascist?* in which she examines accusations of fascism towards Russia, also mentions the militia subculture which includes activists, the Cossack troops, Youth Army movement, war veteran associations and so on. Laruelle notes that this subculture exists in a symbiotic relationship with the authorities and plays a multilayered role: it fosters social consensus around the regime and its values, but also enables the power ministries to secure access to several hundred thousand patriotically minded and trained citizens potentially ready to be recruited.<sup>52</sup> Laruelle claims that the study of this subculture has yet to be written. I partly fill this gap in my research, although the analysis of other paramilitary groups is an important goal for the future research.

Above all, unlike existing research, I shall base my analyses on very recent interviews with war veterans. I hope that my engagement with my informants has been more extensive than in existing research, and my interviews come from a wider range of places. I also use a large number of related materials such as mass media publications, speeches of state officials, and opinion polls results. All of this allows significant insights into the field I study. Previously, most researchers have chosen one specific military campaign for their analysis. Unlike them, I try to trace the personal identities, together with relations with the state, characterizing veterans both the Afghan and the Chechen wars. Throughout my research, I compare them and their consequences. Hopefully, this approach will allow me to create a more holistic view.

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<sup>51</sup> For example B. El'tsin. *Prezidentskii marafon*. Moscow: AST, 2000; G. Troshev. *Moya voina. Zapiski okopnogo generala*. Moscow: Vagrius, 2001.

<<http://www.lib.ru/MEMUARY/CHECHNYA/troshev.txt>>, accessed 13 March 2021.

<sup>52</sup>M. Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021, p. 154.

## CHAPTER 1

### From Outsiders to Heroes.

#### The Relations between Veterans, the Russian State, and Society



**Figure 1.** Storming of the Reichstag model in the Patriot Park in Kubinka<sup>1</sup>

In April 2017, in the giant Patriot Park, a “military Disneyland”, opened two years earlier in Kubinka, on the outskirts of Moscow, 7,000 people – 5000 spectators and 2,000 participants – gathered for a re-enactment of the 1945 storming of the Reichstag. The reconstruction involved dozens of tanks, circling planes, men dressed as Nazi soldiers falling to the ground in flames and a giant model, supposedly, of the Berlin Reichstag. For some reason, the structure used was a model of the contemporary reconstruction, with a glass dome designed by the British architect Norman Foster.<sup>2</sup> In June 2018, the Russian army was granted a new ceremonial

<sup>1</sup> Photo made by RIA Novosti <<http://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/10/08/87436-chemu-chemu-svideteli-my-byli>>, accessed 20 May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> S. Walker, “Replica Reichstag Stormed at Russian 'Military Disneyland'”, *The Guardian*, 24 April 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/24/russians-storm-replica-reichstag-military-disneyland-patriot-park>>, accessed 5 April 2022.

uniform – almost a total replica of the Stalin-era army uniform used by “the winners of 1945”.<sup>3</sup> In April 2019, the largest state-owned TV-company First Channel launched a new “Победа” (“Victory”) station which broadcasted exclusively (and 24/7) “about the most important event in the last century’s national history - Victory in the Great Patriotic War”<sup>4</sup>. In December 2021, the state federal organization *Rospatriotcentr* (*Russian Centre for Civil and Patriotic Education of Children and Youth*) opened the *All-Russia Patriotic Forum* for 600 people (another 4,500 had to attend online) where it presented the Patriot Award-2021 and hold panel discussions on topics like "Natural Heritage as an Object of National Pride and a Basis for Raising Patriotism", "Protection of the Fatherland: Duty or Calling?", "Prevention of Destructive Behaviour among Young People" and "Media Trends of Modern Patriotism".<sup>5</sup> Sergei Kiriyeenko, Presidential Administration deputy chief of staff, praised the attendees for doing “sacred work.”<sup>6</sup>

Much of the news about historical memory and the Russian army sounds grotesque. But it is worth taking seriously. Within two decades, Russia has pursued an unprecedented campaign of patriotic mobilization; has encouraged national pride by commemorating martial victories of the past; has participated in military campaigns in South Ossetia, Ukraine and Syria; has started an expansion of defence industries; and recreated the image of its army by transforming it into, according to an independent Levada Centre poll, the most trusted of Russian institutions (63% of informants voted for it) -- more popular than the Russian president (60%) or secret services (48%).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>A. Soldatov, “Russian Army is Boosting Image and Influence”, *Raamop Rusland*, 24 April 2019. <<https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/militair-beleid/1273-russian-army-is-boosting-image-and-influence>>, accessed 15 October 2020.

<sup>4</sup> The TV-channel’s official site <<https://pobeda.tv/about>>, accessed 5 April 2022. As the website shows, the TV-channel’s programmeremained changed after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

<sup>5</sup> The official Forum website: <<https://xn----7sbplabgvngcojjkd1aq7c.xn--p1ai/forum-day-events/6>>, accessed 5 May 2022.

<sup>6</sup> A Troianovski, I. Nechepurenko, V. Hopkins, “How the Kremlin Is Militarizing Russian Society”, *The New York Times*, 21 December 2021. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/world/europe/russia-military-putin-kremlin.html>>, accessed 5 May 2022.

<sup>7</sup> “Institutsional'noe doverie”, Levada Centre, 24 October 2019. <<https://www.levada.ru/2019/10/24/institutsionalnoe-doverie-5/>>, accessed 2 October 2020.

In the Soviet Union before the Brezhnev era, the army had relatively little impact on politics. Under Brezhnev, ties were closer (given the leader's own contacts in the armed forces), but in the Yeltsin era, the army was a low priority and commemoration of the "Great Patriotic War" sharply declined. Already in the early Putin years, there was a shift to more emphasis on the War and more support for the armed forces, but the big change came only recently. In 2012, after his return for a third term, Vladimir Putin appointed his most loyal ally, Sergei Shoigu, as the Minister of Defence, and money was poured into the army and the military-industrial complex.<sup>8</sup>

From 2007 to 2011, the massive "New Look" army reform was conducted. According to military analysts, Russia's main goal was to achieve regional military dominance, and the reform aimed to optimize troops' readiness and deployability.<sup>9</sup> It also put an end to the mass-mobilization army that formed the basis of the Tsarist Army and its Soviet and Russian successors since 1874.<sup>10</sup> Since 2008, the army became mostly professional. According to The International Institute for Strategic Studies, while Russia's armed forces today are far smaller than those of the Soviet era, conventional military capabilities are now at their highest since the Russian armed forces were formed in 1992.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, the expansion of the Russian defence industry got underway. Since 2010, Russian international arms trade has soared, particularly in the aviation sector and for air defence systems.<sup>12</sup> Russia remains the world's second largest arms exporter (a long way behind the USA, with 19% market share rather than 39%) but significantly ahead of France (11%),

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<sup>8</sup> A. Soldatov, "Russian Army".

<sup>9</sup> R.A. Bitzinger, N. Popescu, eds., *Defence Industries in Russia and China: Players and Strategies*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2017, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> G. P. Lannon, "Russia's New Look Army Reforms and Russian Foreign Policy", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, no. 2, 2011, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> *The International Institute for Strategic Studies. Russia's Military Modernisation: An Assessment*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. <<https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/russias-military-modernisation>>, accessed 14 October 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Bitzinger, Popescu, *Defence Industrie*, p. 20.

and, according to military experts, the country has rapidly increased its military exports.<sup>13</sup> Within 15 years (2005-2015), the Russian defence budget itself doubled in size and reached 4% of GDP.<sup>14</sup> The army thus became an effective mechanism both of legitimation for the regime inside the country and of political influence abroad. Political analysts agree that the Kremlin wants to reassert itself as a great power by displaying its military might.<sup>15</sup>

Besides, the Kremlin has fostered a wave of patriotic mobilization and military-tinged patriotism inside Russia. It has constructed a new discourse of national pride which includes glorification of past military successes, politicizing of historical memory, creation of the Great Patriotic War cult and new enemy images, and the inculcation of “traditional values”, and it has made Russia return “to the traditional form of survival for Russian autocracy: the ‘besieged fortress’”.<sup>16</sup>

Since the beginning of the 2000s, almost all state institutions, as well as the Russian Church, Cossack and veterans’ organizations and specially created institutions like the Military Historical Society or All-Russia "Young Army" National Military Patriotic Social Movement Association (“Юнармия”), have been involved in the system of patriotic mobilization. Their numbers and assertiveness are growing alongside the rise of Russian involvement in different military interventions abroad.<sup>17</sup>

As political analysts agree, patriotic mobilization is, on the one hand, a means of straightening the president’s rule and consolidating Russian citizens around the flag in the face of a phantom threat<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, mounting patriotic sentiment is a way to achieve

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<sup>13</sup> <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/267131/market-share-of-the-leading-exporters-of-conventional-weapons/>>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> L. Shevtsova, “The Survival Paradigm”, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 14 October 2014. <<https://carnegie.ru/2014/10/21/survival-paradigm-pub-57003>>, accessed 14 October 2020.

<sup>17</sup> “Patriotic Mobilization in Russia”, International Crisis Group Report, 2018. <[www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/russianorth-caucasus/251-patriotic-mobilization-russia](http://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/russianorth-caucasus/251-patriotic-mobilization-russia)>, accessed 13 October 2020.

<sup>18</sup> L. Shevtsova, “Military-Patriotic Mobilization and How It Will End”, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 20 May 2014. <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/55647>>, accessed 14 October 2020.

popular support for Russia's new and more assertive foreign policy and the standoff with the West, to legitimize military interventions in former Soviet space as well as further afield, and to help neutralise or offset – at least temporarily – the political impact of coercive international measures such as sanctions.<sup>19</sup>

The army reform and new military campaigns together with the instilling of patriotic sentiment influence the public image of the army. Having strong residual support among citizens even before the reform,<sup>20</sup> the army became more popular after it. According to polls, the public's attitude to the army had started to change in 2014, after the beginning of the Donbass war and, later, the invasion of Syria, and recently reached new height<sup>21</sup>. In April 2019, Russian Public Opinion Foundation (POF, «фонд “Общественное мнение”») conducted a poll which showed that 61% of informants agreed with the statement that “every young man must pass through obligatory military service”. 56% of informants considered military service as prestigious, 72% called in “a school of life”, and 45% claimed that they would like to see their children becoming officers or regular members of armed forces.<sup>22</sup>

Although POF is known for its pro-governmental position (it has mostly held opinion polls for the Presidential Administration and Russian government<sup>23</sup>), the survey conducted 6 months later by the independent Levada Centre showed exactly the same results. 60% of Levada's informants agreed with the statement that “a real man must serve in the army”.<sup>24</sup> That was the highest rate since 1997 when the first poll with such a question was held.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “Patriotic Mobilization in Russia”.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example N. Danilova, “The Development of an Exclusive Veterans' Policy: The Case of Russia”, *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 20, no. 10, 2009, pp. 890-916.

<sup>21</sup> “Rekordnoe chislo rossiyan nazvali sluzhbu v armii obyazannost'yu muzhchiny”, *RBC*, 18 June 2019. <[www.rbc.ru/politics/18/06/2019/5d077f9c9a7947400080b1a2](http://www.rbc.ru/politics/18/06/2019/5d077f9c9a7947400080b1a2)>, accessed 2 October 2020.

<sup>22</sup> “Sluzhba v armii i prestizh professii voennogo. Otnoshenie k sluzhbe v armii k voennym”, *Fom.ru*. 25 April, 2019. <<https://fom.ru/Bezopasnost-i-pravo/14199>>, accessed 2 October, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> POF claims this in its corporate website <<http://corp.fom.ru/clients/category/1>>, accessed 4 October, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> “Institutsional'noe doverie”, *Levada Centre*, 24 October 2019. <<https://www.levada.ru/2019/10/24/institutsionalnoe-doverie-5/>>, accessed 2 October 2020. However, only 15% of informants claimed that military service should be obligatory. 50% would prefer to see professional army with contract-based recruitment, and 26% voted for half professional, half conscription system.

<sup>25</sup> “Rekordnoe chislo rossiyan nazvali sluzhbu v armii obyazannost'yu muzhchiny”.

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In the new Russia, the attempts to use the cult of the Great Patriotic War for the instilling of patriotic sentiment began in the very beginning of the 2000s,<sup>26</sup> although the manipulations of the memory of the war emerged much earlier, in the middle of the 1960s, when Leonid Brezhnev's government started searching for new sources of its legitimacy.<sup>27</sup> However, for a long time, the "Great Patriotic War" (GPW) was the only military victory used for propaganda purposes. More recent war campaigns were deeply unpopular, including the first (after the GPW) big war, following the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. In 1991, according to Levada Centre's poll, 69% of informants called the invasion of Afghanistan "a state crime".<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, in its push to promote the militaristic glory ethos, the contemporary patriotic mobilization turned to this unpromising war, and, later, to the also unpromising if more successful military campaigns in Chechnya. In this chapter, I shall attempt to trace how the state has built a new image of these unpopular wars and has started to use it in the new patriotic mobilization campaign. Besides this, more generally, I shall concentrate on the relationship between the Russian state, society, wars veterans and their associations. I shall analyze the history of the attitudes adopted by state institutions and the general public towards the wars in Afghanistan and its participants.

If one compares the process of demobilization in Russia and most other countries, a fundamental difference emerges. Veterans from other parts of the world, from US soldiers returning after the Vietnam War,<sup>29</sup> to the participants of the civil war in Zimbabwe,<sup>30</sup> have

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example: B. Dubin, "Bremya pobedy. Boris Dubin o politicheskom upotreblenii simvolov". *Kriticheskaya massa*, no. 2, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> See about it: N. Tumarkin. *The Living & the Dead: the Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*, New York: Basic Books, 1994.

<sup>28</sup> L. Gudkov, "Pamyat' ob afganskoj vojne (1979-1989)", Levada Centre. <<https://www.levada.ru/2020/02/25/pamyat-ob-afganskoj-vojne-1979-1989>>, accessed 15 May 2020.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, K. Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, M. Musemwa, "The Ambiguities of Democracy: The Demobilization of the Zimbabwean Ex-combatants and the Ordeal of Rehabilitation", *Dismissed: Demobilization and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Africa*, Halfway House: Institute for Defence Policy, 1995, pp. 44–57.

generally built their new civil identities on confrontation with the state. I hypothesize that in Russia, by contrast, veterans have acquired a sense of loyalty to the state and have formed the core of the government's support. Currently, veterans' unions are united with patriotic movements; many of their leaders have become high-ranking politicians. They repeatedly participate in pro-government political actions and help to build the central narratives of state propaganda. I assume that, after feeling betrayed and neglected in the 1990s, the veterans and their communities felt, with the start of the patriotic mobilization campaign, that they were finally starting to receive what they deserved. They welcomed the shifts in the state rhetoric and attitude towards them, and became active and sincere participants of the new state propaganda campaign. The state has secured loyal and united supporters who were ready to follow commands and, besides, enhanced state legitimacy.

Using interviews with veterans of Afghan war which I collected during my fieldwork, in the following chapter, I will trace the roots of the loyalty of veterans, show changes in their self-identity and mass perception, and analyze how ex-soldiers are becoming a political tool and one of the key drivers in supporting the Russian state.

### **Military Service in Russia in the 20th Century: Living on the Edge of War**

The militarist component has strongly influenced Russian national identity over a significant period of time. According to political analyst Alexander Golz, the myth that the country has always defended itself against countless external enemies was persistently disseminated for centuries, and, therefore, the desire to defend the Motherland (and hence respect for the army) has become an inherent attribute of every citizen.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>A. Golz, "Glavnoe prepyatstvie voennoi reformy— rossiiskii militarizm", *Pro et Contra*, no. 3, 2004, p. 59.

After 1917, the country spent decades fighting internal wars (including conflicts with “internal enemies”, such as collectivization) as well as external wars, and then constantly preparing for the next ones, establishing special social institutions and practices around the army and creating rhetorics of searching for internal enemies and external threats.<sup>32</sup> In other words, militarism is a real part of the Russian political landscape and constitutive in important ways of Russian social realities.

According to sociologist Lev Gudkov, the cult of the army in the USSR took shape at the very beginning of the 1930s, although at that time there was little likelihood that another state would attack the USSR: the creation of a powerful army was one of the policies developed by Stalin to strengthen the regime. By the end of the decade, a central ideological justification for strengthening the repressive regime had become the inevitability of world war.<sup>33</sup> This feeling of living on the edge of war declined after the Stalin’s death, but grew up again in various periods of the Cold War, and eventually became so ingrained that it was elevated into a key trait of national identity.

Researchers agree in terming the relations between the soldiers, the party, and society at large not just co-existence, as in some other countries (particularly neutral ones), but symbiosis.<sup>34</sup> Lev Gudkov states that the army was a model of the Soviet state, with its rigid hierarchy, centralized repressive control, a monopoly on the means of coercion, weak functional differentiation, strict disciplinary codes, repression of individual autonomy and freedom, and the absence of diverse sources of information.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, O. Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941-1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> L. Gudkov. “The Fetters of Victory. How the War Provides Russia with its Identity”, *Redaktion Osteuropa*, 5 March 2005, p. 40. <<https://www.zeitschrift-osteuropa.de/hefte/international/eurozine-en/the-fetters-of-victory>>, accessed 20 July 2020.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example: D. Herspring, *Russian Civil-Military Relations*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996; N. Danilova, “Veterans’ Policy in Russia: a Puzzle of Creation”, *The Journal of Power Institutions*, no. 6/7, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Gudkov, “The Fetters of Victory”, p. 43.

Compulsory military service, when instituted in 1939, was announced as a privilege, “the sacred duty and honourable obligation of every Soviet citizen”.<sup>36</sup> This law not only made 2-5 years of military service (the length of service depended on the branch of the armed forces in which recruits served) obligatory for all Russian male citizens but also “removed the social class criterion in assignation of service”<sup>37</sup> and equalized citizens before service discipline. As a result, the army proved to be a means to social and territorial mobility for a large number of Soviet citizens in the countryside (who before 1974 were otherwise tied to the collective or state farms where they resided), and a common route to career advancement for all socially disenfranchised citizens. Another possible career path was the police service. However, in contrast with the army one, it was perceived by society as a part of a state authoritarian force, encounters with which were best avoided.<sup>38</sup> Thus, it was not popular as a career destination even among disadvantaged members of society.

At the same time as ensuring mobility, however, universal conscription also had a stabilizing effect: in particular, it contributed to the reproduction of militarism in the USSR. The lessons of patriotism and loyalty, first delivered through the Komsomol, were reinforced and cemented in the Soviet army.<sup>39</sup> It is generally agreed that Soviet education was designed to promote obedience and martial skills rather than free thought: “It was believed that someone who does not know how to disassemble and reassemble a Kalashnikov rifle is not capable of love for the Motherland”.<sup>40</sup>

From the 1930s onwards, most Soviet men, whatever their generation and ethnic background, had some experience of army service, even if this was only introductory courses

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<sup>36</sup> “Zakon SSSR o vseobschei voinskoi objasannosti”, 1939.  
<[http://www.soldat.ru/doc/law/law\\_war/war1939.html](http://www.soldat.ru/doc/law/law_war/war1939.html)>, accessed 3 July 2020.

<sup>37</sup> E. Jones, *Red Army and Society: A Sociology of the Soviet Military*, Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> See M. Zernova, “The Public Image of the Contemporary Russian Police: Impact of Personal Experiences of Policing, Wider Social Implications and the Potential for Change”, *Policing And International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*, 35(2), May 2012, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> S.Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 175.

<sup>40</sup> Golz, “Glavnoe prepyatstvie voennoi reformy”, p. 59.

at school or university; from the Finno-Soviet War until the late 1960s, the majority served for a substantial period of time. Even those who were sceptical about Soviet values more generally sometimes retained an attachment to military ideals, or at least to the belief that the army was well-disciplined, a peace-keeping force, and so on. At the same time, from the 1970s onwards, the levelling function of the armed forces was eroded by the fact that Russians from the more privileged sectors of society largely avoided service (through higher education exemptions or medical exemptions). In other words, military service in this later period served to sustain and reinforce traditional patterns of male behaviour in the less advantaged strata of the Russian population, and had a crucial role in constituting male identity.<sup>41</sup>

It was the army that claimed to be the "keeper of the best in people and the system",<sup>42</sup> a model for the creation of "values of service, selflessness, duty."<sup>43</sup> As Lev Gudkov has argued, these claims had a broader political resonance: military virtues like "heroism, loyalty, readiness for self-sacrifice, courage, obedience, steadfastness (and) fortitude comprised a particularly important area of action for the semantics of Soviet power".<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, a respectful attitude towards the army overall does not always correlate with an equally admiring attitude towards veterans of individual military campaigns. For a long time the Second World War was the only officially celebrated war in the history of the Soviet Union, and its veterans the only ones recognized as "veterans" at all.<sup>45</sup> According to Soviet military legislation, only ex-soldiers of this war were considered as war veterans with the relevant social

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<sup>41</sup> I discuss it in Chapter 3.

<sup>42</sup> A. Levinson, "Proshchai, oruzhie!", *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, no.2, 1999. <<https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/1999/2/ob-estetike-nasiliya.html>>, accessed 2 July 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Gudkov, "The Fetters of Victory", p. 45.

<sup>45</sup> See: M. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

benefits.<sup>46</sup> Other ex-military personnel, even ones who had fought or been injured in Soviet military operations, did not have rights to special welfare or medical treatment.<sup>47</sup>

### Society and Veterans: “We Did Not Send You There”

In 2019, one of my informants, Ali, a Dagestani born in 1968, described the welcoming attitudes he experienced after he returned home from military service in the beginning of 1980s:

*“Как вас встретили после армии?”*

*“Шикарно. Это было вообще... Неудобно было, люди выходили, настолько меня уважали, неудобно я так себя чувствовал, не люблю излишнее внимание... Но когда приехал, когда узнавали, что я афганец, то даже хулиганы в Хасавюрте... Разборки были, меня хотели кинуть, не заплатит. Там компания была, шестеро их. И я, естественно, начал [драться]... И удостоверение у меня выпало... И там кто-то крикнул: "Афганец он!" Остановились. "Если что нужно — обращайся", туда-сюда. Что самое интересное, они вообще сильные хулиганы были, даже не хулиганы, бандиты”.*

The attitude towards afgantsy as a group was similarly volatile, and varied considerably over the course of time.

During the first 5-6 years of the Afghan war, its details, goals, expenses, casualties and military operations were unknown to Soviet citizens. The dissemination of unofficial information (for example, by the soldiers themselves) was prohibited.<sup>48</sup> Even propaganda newspapers published in Soviet bases in Afghanistan were censored.<sup>49</sup> The state started to

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<sup>46</sup> Veterans were eligible for a free Zaporozhets car, free public transportation, they were first in line to get a flat, build a house or purchase scarce goods etc. See N. Danilova, “The Development of an Exclusive Veterans’ Policy”, p. 906.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 903.

<sup>48</sup> A. Kinsburgskii, M. Topalov, “Reabilitatsiia uchastnikov afganskoi voyny v obshchestvennom mnenii”, *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, no. 1, 1992, p. 105.

<sup>49</sup> According to a military journalist’s evidence, counter-intelligence agents were obliged to distribute an exact amount of issues of the divisional newspaper among soldiers, then collect all of them and destroy

publish official information about the course of the war as late as 1983-1984 – “When Andropov came to power”, explains one of the military journalists.<sup>50</sup> Presumably, this followed a standard pattern whereby Soviet leaders strove to distance themselves from the previous leader’s policies.

At the same time, Soviet media started building an official heroic narrative of the war. Sociologist Natalia Danilova, in her research on the commemoration of war victims, carried out a discursive analysis of Soviet press coverage which enabled her to construct a typical story of the “average” Soviet soldier as represented in the media. He was a competent if not outstanding pupil at school, ambitious and loyal to his family, the authorities, the party, and Soviet society. He went voluntarily to Afghanistan to carry out his “sacred international duty,” and he laid down his life for revolutionary ideals and the peaceful future of this mighty country. Alternatively, he returned home after successfully fulfilling his “sacred international duty,” set records at work and was an example to other youth.<sup>51</sup>

The media campaign worked well, and the first returnees from Afghanistan were greeted as national heroes, while thousands of new recruits all over the country were keen to fulfill their own “sacred international duty” in the foreign land, to an extent that can sound grotesque in retrospect. “Я помню, в 18 лет я бегал в военкомат, грубо говоря, взятки давал, чтобы меня отправили [в Афганистан], мясо приносил сушеное”. (From the interview with Shamil, city of Makhachkala).

At the same time, idealizing the war was becoming more of a challenge. Although the rising numbers of war casualties were concealed, rumours about them were spreading through Soviet towns, reinforced by the regular arrival of flag-draped coffins coming back from the foreign land. A large number of injured or disabled soldiers started returning to the USSR. By the end

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them. (A.Kolotilo, “3341 den' muzhestva i geroizma”, *Ehntsiklopediya Ministerstva oborony RF*. <<http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/history/more.htm?id=11630270@cmsArticle>>, accessed 15 May 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> N. Danilova, “Victims and Heroes. Commemorating the Russian Military Casualties in the Chechen Conflicts”, *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, Routledge, 2014, p. 905.

of the 1980s, men with missing limbs, singing military songs and begging on the streets or in the metro became an important feature of the Soviet urban landscape.

The main shift both in official policies towards ex-soldiers and in the public attitude towards them occurred during the final years of the war in Afghanistan when Soviet society was finally allowed to become more familiar with the details of the war, though even then, only in a limited way. On 10 May 1988, the Central Committee of the Communist Party published a confidential report with (very limited) information about the war and few figures: the death toll (13310 killed, 35478 wounded, and 311 missing) and annual financial cost (5 billion roubles).<sup>52</sup> The same year, veterans of the war in Afghanistan received the first official status of “*воины-интернационалисты*” (“*warrior-internationalists*”). This was inferior (in terms of both welfare and prestige) to the status of the Great Patriotic War veterans, but better than the position of any other Soviet war veterans.

This timid beginning accelerated as perestroika, the official rhetoric of transparency and the policy of glasnost did their job: the attitude towards the war became more and more negative from year to year. In June 1989, in his speech at the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, Andrei Sakharov<sup>53</sup> called the Afghan war “a *criminal adventure undertaken* by unknown persons” and “enormous crime against the motherland.”<sup>54</sup> Just six months later, the Soviet government officially acknowledged that the war had been a mistake which “deserves moral and political condemnation”.<sup>55</sup> The attitude of society changed consequently.

When in 1991 the respected sociological Levada Centre asked Russians whether the Soviet troops should had been fighting in Afghanistan until they had won the war, only 4% agreed with this statement while 80% were opposed to it.<sup>56</sup> This attitude did not change over time. In

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<sup>52</sup> Prilozhenie No. 8. Pis'mo TSK KPSS po Afganistanu, cited in A. Lyakhovskii, *Tragediya i doblest' Afgana*, Moscow: Ehksmo, 2009.

<sup>53</sup> The famous dissident and one of the Soviet hydrogen bomb's creators.

<sup>54</sup> *Pravda* [newspaper], 5 June 1989, p. 3

<sup>55</sup> *Pravda* [newspaper], 26 December 1989.

<sup>56</sup> Gudkov, “Pamyat' ob afganskoi voine”.

1999, in another Levada Centre poll, 88% of respondents said that it was unnecessary to invade Afghanistan in December 1979. 69% agreed that the invasion was a state crime.<sup>57</sup>

Predictably, the societal attitude to Afghan veterans shifted from greeting them as heroes to their stigmatization as war criminals. They still received official “welcome home” ceremonies, but the veterans started calling these “the false face of welcome”.<sup>58</sup> Society – outside the rituals – met soldiers with anger and fear, and the overriding sentiment of the returning afgantsy was also anger. According to historian Yaacov Ro’i, who interviewed soldiers in 1991, 13% of his informants visualized themselves on returning home as insufficiently appreciated heroes; 34% - as people to whom society owed a debt; and 53% as pawns in a political game.<sup>59</sup> On a personal level, the former soldiers found themselves increasingly misunderstood, judged and marginalized.<sup>60</sup> My informant Nikolai came back from Afghanistan to his home city of Bryansk in 1985. He bitterly remembered that he had come back “*не так как герой, но нормально, встречали по-человечески*” but within a few years he found himself in social isolation: “*Когда я встречался с молодой моей [будущей] женой, ее подруги как-то даже боялись подходить к нам*”. Answering my question as to when exactly he noticed this shift, Nikolai also pointed out not a time period but the political leader: “*Это начало меняться во всем обществе, наверное, но, если конкретно нас опустили ниже плинтуса, при Ельцине, (...) тогда денег уже нигде не становилось.*”

Throughout the 1990s, the war was remembered as disgraceful, unnecessary, and a signal defeat. Soon, however, according to military psychologist Elena Senyavskaya, the collapse of the USSR, the economic crisis, a change in the social system and bloody feuds on the borders of the former Soviet Union led to the decline of popular interest in the Afghan war, and to

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<sup>57</sup> “Afganskaya voina 1979-1989”, Levada Centre, 13 February 2014. <[www.levada.ru/2014/02/13/afganskaya-vojna-1979-1989-gg/](http://www.levada.ru/2014/02/13/afganskaya-vojna-1979-1989-gg/)>, accessed 13 May 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Y. Ro’i, “The Varied Reintegration of Afghan War Veterans in Their Home Society”, *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015, p. 24.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

afgantsy as well.<sup>61</sup> Two of my informants, a relatively prosperous Muscovite and a disabled Dagestan villager, remembered this period in a similar way:

*“Люди были выброшены обществом. Не было ни того, ни психологов и надо было как-то выживать. Вот как детей выбросили в море: кто научится плавать, тот научится, кто не научится — тот утонет. У нас то же самое. Многие у нас это самое не одолели и особенно спиртное. Один пил-пил и повесился от горя. И таких много там”.*

(From the interview with Vladimir, Moscow).

*“Большинство афганцев по России спились, я знаю. (...) Большинство, которые попали под эту волну, это предательство госструктур. Есть моменты, когда лично мне в Моздоке Стародубцева — помню фамилию даже этой женщины, — в кассе мне сказала: “Мы вас туда не отправляли”. Вот эта фраза... Если бы я сам не столкнулся с этим... [я бы не поверил]”.* (From the interview with Ali, Leninaul).

In 1995, the status obtained by veterans in 1988 was enshrined in the "Law on Veterans".<sup>62</sup> Disabled ex-servicemen gained pensions and a minimum level of medical care. But the welfare support provided to them was much lower than to the veterans of the Great Patriotic War. Ex-soldiers were divided even by title. Afgantsy were called not “war veterans” but “*ветераны боевых действий*” (combat veterans)<sup>63</sup>. The law confirmed that in the state discourse, the Great Patriotic War was still the main and the only real war, and its combatants, the only real veterans.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> E. Senyavskaya, *Psikhologiya voiny v 20 veke: istoricheskii opyt Rossii*, Moscow: Rossiiskaya politicheskaya entsiklopediya, 1999, p. 88.

<sup>62</sup> “Federal’nyi zakon o veteranakh; ot 12.01.1995 N 5-FZ” *Consultant* [online database] <[http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_5490](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_5490)>, accessed 7 October 2020.

<sup>63</sup> “Federal’nyi zakon o veteranakh, N 5-ФЗ 12.01.1995”, *Consultant* [online database] <[http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_5490](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_5490)>, accessed 1 July 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Although, it is important to note that Great Patriotic War veterans did not obtain their high social status easily as well. Soviet propaganda created a myth about their unproblematic return to civilian life while in reality the veterans were frustrated by corruption, bureaucracy the negative attitude they received from society throughout the first post-war decades. On this see, for example: R. Dale. “Rats and Resentment: The Demobilization of the Red Army in Postwar Leningrad, 1945-50”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 45, no. 1, January 2010, pp. 113-133.

Besides, from the beginning of the 1990s, all afgansty whom I interviewed became familiar with the phrase “Мы вас туда не посылали” (“We didn’t send you there”). It became a symbol of the neglect of ex-soldiers from both state and society. Moreover, society, frightened by the "Afghan syndrome" and media publications about veterans struggling with PTSD and becoming potentially aggressive, further stigmatized and marginalized them, as it happened with Vietnam veterans in the USA previously. As all of my informants noted, after coming back home, they found themselves in social isolation within their communities. Ravshan, a taxi driver from the Dagestan capital Makhachkala, told me that he frequently heard that if a soldier served in Afghanistan “*это уже всё – ты был на войне, ты уже психически изменился. Его психика нарушена войной*”.

### **The New State Discourse of the War in Afghanistan: Unity and Heroism**

At the beginning of the 1990s, not only society but the state too shied away from dealing with the consequences of the war. Having been directly involved in shaping the military identity of the soldiers, it abandoned them after their service was over. The negative attitude to the war affected attitudes towards the state officials and, as Michael Galbas shows, hastened reluctance to accept the legitimacy of Soviet rule and of the Soviet army.<sup>65</sup> After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, no state official wanted to be remembered in the context of this inglorious war. Moreover, public indifference or hostility to the outcome of the war left no ground for signs of social respect that ex-soldiers expected.<sup>66</sup>

Notably, according to my interviews with ex-soldiers, from the 1990s, they expected to receive recognition from the state not so much in the form of medals, memorials and publications in the media, but rather in the form of social benefits and welfare. According to

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<sup>65</sup> M. Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory’: Strategies of Legitimization and Fictionalization of the Soviet-Afghan War in the Russian Federation”, *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015, p. 108.

<sup>66</sup> Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, p. 131.

Serguei Oushakine, veterans<sup>67</sup> endowed the notions of money and debt with a strong moral connotation, so often economic benefits were presented as a logical sign of respect.<sup>68</sup>

Most of the afgantsy whom I interviewed bore out these patterns. They told me detailed stories of their long-standing struggle for social benefits, which clearly evolved into stories about praise and respect. Talking about soldiers' problems with obtaining jobs and the state's lack of assistance to them, Nikolai from Bryansk made a direct link between the moral and financial debts that the country owed to veterans: *“Если власть посылает, Родина-мать посылает в армию – значит, и после армии должны его встретить как человека”*. Finishing his narrative about the closure of a special state shop where veterans had been able to buy goods at reduced prices, ex-soldier Ali concluded: *“Государство повернулось к нам спиной”*.

Ali was by no means wrong in his analysis. I would also argue that amidst the ongoing economic crisis of the 1990s, the state admitted its powerlessness in maintaining the well-being of veterans and passed this responsibility onto them, their families and, particularly, the unions. The establishment of the latter, the state strongly advocated.

However, from the middle of the 1990s, the state tried to shift public rhetoric from *“Мы вас туда не послали”* to an emphasis on the courage and heroism of soldiers and their faithfulness to the military oath. Such justification, as Michael Galbas claims, served the cause of rehabilitating the Afghan veterans, supporting their social reintegration, lending them new prestige and also strengthening political ties with the veterans and winning their political support.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless for veterans, with the close link that they made between welfare and respect, the change of the rhetoric was definitely insufficient. In line with their earlier strategies, the veterans preferred to present themselves as victims of the state, making the state responsible for their wellbeing.

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<sup>67</sup> Serguei Oushakine is referring to veterans of the Chechen war but it can be applied towards *afgansty* as well.

<sup>68</sup> Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, p. 164.

<sup>69</sup> Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory”, p. 109.

At the very beginning of Vladimir Putin's first presidential term, a new state discourse of the war in Afghanistan began to emerge. A key early example was Putin's address commemorating the eleventh anniversary of the troops' withdrawal in 1988, written a month and a half after the new president came to power, and already presenting all the main tropes of the future state discourse: *“На афганской земле воины-интернационалисты честно выполнили свой долг, были верны присяге, данной Родине. В ожесточенных боях они проявили беспримерную стойкость и мужество, прославились несгибаемым боевым духом и храбростью. Подвиг героев афганской войны неподвластен времени. И поэтому мы всегда будем помнить павших сынов России и воздавать дань уважения ветеранам-афганцам. Многие из них и сегодня в строю. В ходе антитеррористической операции на Северном Кавказе их боевой опыт и выучка не раз помогли переломить самые критические ситуации, а значит – сберечь жизни своих однополчан”*.<sup>70</sup>

The address adopts a number of different strategies at the same time. Firstly, it raises soldiers' devotion to military duty and courage. Secondly, it actualizes the war via allusions to other counter-terrorism campaigns. Later Putin compared the invasion of Afghanistan with the battle against abstract "international terrorism", and "political Islam".<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the analysis of Putin's official speeches shows that throughout his first two presidential terms, he refrained from justifying the war in Afghanistan. For example, in his official speech on the 15th anniversary of the withdrawal of troops, the president called the war "hopeless", mentioned the doubts of the Soviet leadership about the necessity of the military invasion, and explained its

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<sup>70</sup> “Ispolnyayushchii obyazannosti Prezidenta Vladimir Putin napravil privetstvie uchastnikam torzhestvennogo zasedaniya, posvyashchennogo 11-i godovshchine vyvoda ogranichennogo kontingenta sovetskikh voisk iz Afganistana, i vsem veteranam-afgantsam”, Kremlin.ru, 15 February 2000. <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/37924>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

<sup>71</sup> “Prezident Vladimir Putin vstretilsya s veteranami voyny v Afganistane”, *Pervyi kanal*, 15 February 2015. <[www.1tv.ru/news/2015-02-15/27203-prezident\\_vladimir\\_putin\\_vstretilsya\\_s\\_veteranami\\_voyny\\_v\\_afganistane](http://www.1tv.ru/news/2015-02-15/27203-prezident_vladimir_putin_vstretilsya_s_veteranami_voyny_v_afganistane)>, accessed 19 May 2020.

origins as due to a request from the Afghan government, "the geopolitical interests of the period" and by "the desire of the Soviet leadership to secure our southern borders".<sup>72</sup>

Instead of justifying the war, the new discourse of the 2000s termed it "the war without victory or defeat". According to Putin, *"военного поражения не было. В военном плане СССР достиг всех поставленных целей. Однако были допущены непростительные политические ошибки"*.<sup>73</sup>

The third element of the new discourse emphasizes the "bonds of Afghan brotherhood", becoming a leitmotif of all official speeches during the 2000s. According to Putin, it was:

*"Единство ветеранов, которое позволило им преодолеть физические и моральные травмы, опираясь, прежде всего, на свою солидарность и взаимоподдержку. (...) Вы, наконец, сумели доказать, что вас объединяет не только общая радость побед или горечь потерь и поражений, но и умение работать, способность помогать друг другу"*.<sup>74</sup>

Boris Gromov, the last commander of the Soviet 40th Army in Afghanistan and a high state official of the Soviet Union, also claimed that *"практически во всех частях и подразделениях 40-й армии царил уникальная атмосфера братства и взаимовыручки"*.<sup>75</sup>

Remarkably, the narrative of battle brotherhood, which had appeared during the war in Afghanistan and had been fuelled by the negative attitude of Soviet society towards the soldiers, became, a decade later, the focus of the state's perception of the veterans and their main achievement. Moreover, if previously, the state discourse had focused on veterans' suffering,

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<sup>72</sup> "Vystuplenie na sobranii, posvyashchennom Dnyu pamyati voinov-internatsionalistov", Kremlin.ru, 15 February, 2004. <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24827>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

<sup>73</sup> "Putin: Voennogo porazheniya SSSR v Afganistane ne bylo", RBK, 11 November 2001. <<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/11/2001/5703b2a69a7947783a5a209b>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

<sup>74</sup> "Vystuplenie na sobranii, posvyashchennom Dnyu pamyati voinov-internatsionalistov".

<sup>75</sup> B. Gromov. *Ogranichennyi kontingent*, 2009. <<http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/history/more.htm?id=10949893@cmsArticle>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

now it stressed (exactly as veterans unions had been doing previously) their successes, achieved due to their cohesion.

The majority of the official speeches actualized the concept of battle brotherhood and emphasized that: *“Россия и сегодня нуждается в таких людях, которые умеют решать самые сложные задачи”<sup>76</sup>; “Уникальный багаж знаний и опыта воинов-афганцев востребован и в наши дни: в Вооружённых Силах и органах правопорядка, в государственных и общественных организациях, в том числе в ответственной работе по воспитанию молодёжи в духе патриотизма, гражданственности и бескорыстного служения России”<sup>77</sup>.*

At the same time, both the unity and the heroism of the afgantsy were opposed to the futility of the war itself and made this unity more meaningful and significant. According to Putin, *“События в Афганистане подлежат серьёзному, скрупулезному, беспристрастному анализу со стороны политиков, историков. Но тем, кто воевал в Афганистане, кто исполнял требование присяги, нечего прятать глаза”<sup>78</sup>.* The experience of the war and the mythology around its soldiers became more important than the cause of the conflict or its outcome.

It is interesting to compare the media coverage of the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the 2000s-2010s. Investigating the visual representation of war and violence in the Soviet, and later Russian, journal *Krasnaya Zvezda*, historian Philipp Casula showed how the conflict in Afghanistan was framed by Soviet narratives about “дружба народов” (“friendship of peoples”) and by the neocolonial idea of a civilizing mission. Conflict and violence were carefully hidden behind a Potemkinesque facade, The Soviet army was portrayed as an

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<sup>76</sup> “Nastalo vremya prekratit' vsyakuyu politicheskuyu voznyu vokrug sobytii v Afganistane, zayavil Prezident V. Putin na vstreche s voinami–internatsionalistami”, Kremlin.ru, 19 February 2004. <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/30384>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

<sup>77</sup> “Pozdravlenie veteran afganskoi voiny s 20-i godovshchinoi vyvoda Ogranichennogo kontingenta sovetskikh voisk iz Respubliki Afganistan”, Kremlin.ru, 15 February 2009. <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/3192>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

<sup>78</sup> “Nastalo vremya prekratit' vsyakuyu politicheskuyu voznyu”.

exemplary institution admired by the Afghan people.<sup>79</sup> Remarkably, Casula's description turned out to be the most precise outline of the media representation of the conflict in Afghanistan throughout the 2010s.

Since approximately the beginning of the 2010s, state media had begun to justify the Afghan war, to describe Afghan economic recovery and industrial successes during the time of the occupation,<sup>80</sup> and soldiers' "боевые подвиги" (military exploits) and combat brotherhood,<sup>81</sup> publishing veterans' interviews about their peacekeeping missions and warm, friendly relations with the Afghan citizens, and even testimonies of the grateful people of Afghanistan about the merits of the invasion<sup>82</sup>. Notably, if in the 1990s journalists often wrote about war casualties or disabled veterans or *afgantsy*, in the 2010s state media returned to the glorifying Soviet narrative.

To what extent did the new media narrative and militarized state discourse shape public opinion? We do not know it for sure, not being able to separate the effect of the media coverage from other factors, for instance, shifts in inter-generational memory. Nevertheless, according to the Levada Centre, the media narrative and state discourse had a very significant effect. Lev Gudkov, the head of the Levada Centre, claims that grief and embarrassment gradually

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<sup>79</sup> P. Casula, "The Other in Pictures of War and Peace in the Soviet Union and in Contemporary Russia", paper presented at the conference *Photography and Visual Orders*, 2-4 October 13, Moscow. <<https://arthist.net/archive/5980>>, accessed 10 August, 2020.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, a 2019 piece: «Вы пришли, чтобы отсрочить большую войну афганских таджиков с пуштунами. Оставайтесь здесь подольше. Если войну не закончите, заберете ее с собой, – пророчествовал морщинистый дервиш. Он не ошибся».

<sup>81</sup> For example, in the same source: «Боевое афганское братство – не пустые слова. (...) Спецназовцы ГРУ в провинции Кунар после тяжелого боя специально проводили операцию, чтобы забрать тела убитых ребят, и рисковали жизнью, чтобы ни в коем случае не оставить их «духам». Но возникала и гордость за таких отважных и бесстрашных людей, которые родились в нашей стране. Их отвагу не покупали, и жизнь они отдавали потому, что не могли поступить иначе». (Ibid).

<sup>82</sup> «Бизнесмен Ахмадулла Восток живет сейчас в Казахстане. Годы, следовавшие за выводом Советской армии, он вспоминает как очень мрачные: «Моджахеды ограбили все государственные учреждения. Просто заходили и грабили. Мародерство было везде, на базарах торговали всем, что было в резерве у государства: горючим, едой, одеялами, боеприпасами. Армия и правительство развалились, их просто не стало. Как управлять государством, моджахеды не знали. Первое время им помогали специалисты. Потом и они разбежались. Становилось все хуже и хуже». (F. Prokudin, "Му не ubezjali iz Afganistana, my ushli". Byla li sovershena oshibka 30 let nazad", *RIA Novosti*, 15 February 2019. <<https://ria.ru/20190215/1550678988.html?in=t>>, accessed 20 August, 2020.)

disappeared from the public perception of the war in Afghanistan. Within the last 25 years, the share of respondents who considered the war “a state crime” has decreased from 69 to 44 percent (i.e. in one and a half times). Subsequently, the numbers of people who justify the war have grown from 23 to 34 percent.<sup>83</sup>

Notably, there were more war supporters among respondents who lived in big cities and had a relatively high level of education and income. Gudkov assumes that they receive information from the Russian media and are more ideologically driven and trust the authorities, while people who condemn the war are older, poorer, live in provincial towns and villages and receive their memory of the brutal war not from the TV screen but from personal channels, such as conversations with relatives or familiar veterans.<sup>84</sup> But how do veterans themselves perceive the war?

### **First Veterans’ Unions: from International Propaganda to Footwear Manufacturing**

In the Soviet period, the authorities had opposed the formation of associations or unions of veterans (even participants of the broadly commemorated Great Patriotic War). As historian Mark Edele shows, the Soviet authorities expected the veterans to integrate smoothly into civilian society after they demobilized and not to make any claims to constitute a separate social group. There were numerous reasons for this. Firstly, veterans were not a social class in a Marxist sense and could not exist as a social group with shared interests. Secondly, their unity would challenge the organizational monopoly of the Bolshevik Party and thus would be counter-revolutionary. Thirdly, if veterans had started to defend their social privileges, the Soviet Union would not have been able to afford the expected level of welfare provision.<sup>85</sup> Even

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<sup>83</sup> Gudkov, “Pamyat' ob afganskoi voine”.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> M. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 156.

long after Stalin's death in 1953, the official party line was to deny any legitimacy or necessity to veterans' organizations under Socialism.<sup>86</sup>

The first Soviet Committee of War Veterans was established in July 1956 for "strengthening ties with international and foreign national organizations fighting against the threat of a new war"<sup>87</sup> – which simply meant propaganda. A veteran union without any veterans, it had no primary groups, regional branches or formal members. But, as Mark Edele describes, even at the first plenary meetings of the organization, when the leaders of the Committee tried to explain the importance of international propaganda, all of the veterans present in the room completely ignored official organizations' statutes and "simply believed that they needed to defend veterans who were not treated correctly".<sup>88</sup>

It took nearly a decade for Soviet political elite to change their position towards the unions. In 1960s, when, according to historian Nina Tumarkin, the Communist Party and the Soviet government had been searching for sources of legitimacy that could mobilize the loyalty of the youth, maintain order and achieve a semblance of energy to counter the growing nationwide apathy, the idealized war experience had been transformed into a reservoir of national suffering, and the global shift in attitude to the Great Patriotic War began.<sup>89</sup>

As a part of this shift, in 1965 the Council of Ministers published a decree that extended the Great Patriotic War invalidity benefits "to other soldiers who became disabled as a result of injury, concussion or mutilation received during the defence of the USSR".<sup>90</sup> The same year, the veteran's Committee gained permission to establish regional branches and to recruit members, and ex-soldiers from all over the country began to join it. Within the next decade, the

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>87</sup> Y. Reent, "K yubileyu rossiiskogo komiteta veteranov voiny i voennoi sluzhby", *Ugolovno-ispolnitel'noe pravo*, 2016. <<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/k-yubileyu-rossiyskogo-komiteta-veteranov-voyny-i-voennoy-sluzhby>>, accessed 18 May 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War*, p. 164.

<sup>89</sup> N. Tumarkin, "The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory", *European Review*, 2003, vol. 11(4), p. 600.

<sup>90</sup> *Spravochnik po zakonodatel'stvu dlya ofitserov Sovetskoi armii i flota*, Moscow: Voennoeizdatel'stvo ministerstva oborony SSSR, 1977, p. 341.

organization had united almost a million people – nearly as many old soldiers as were still alive.<sup>91</sup> However, the state did not encourage personal initiatives, and the veterans’ movement which “threatened to become a parallel power structure”, inevitably “ran into a conflict with the party”.<sup>92</sup> In 1976, right before the beginning of the Afghan war, the Central Committee published a resolution “On the Further Improvement of the Activities of Local Alliances of War Veterans”, which reminded veterans that the main reason for their union was international propaganda and reduced the size of the organization.<sup>93</sup> Soon, all of the organization’s branches were truncated, reformed, placed under party’s control and lost any ability to develop as an independent force. As Mark Edele concluded, the competition between veterans’ alliances ended in favour of the party cells.<sup>94</sup>

The way that unions of Afghan soldiers were established looked very different from the above narrative. Firstly, clubs started to emerge in the middle of the 1980s as small informal groups of friends who met in homes and cafes to drink, reminisce and help each other out in various small ways.<sup>95</sup> But mostly they were organized officially with the assistance of local Komsomol organizations.<sup>96</sup> In 1984, one of the most popular Soviet newspapers, *Komsomol’skaya Pravda*, published a piece about a 23-year-old Afghan veteran, Alexander Nemtsov, who was badly injured while doing his “international duty” and arrived in his home town confined to a wheelchair. The article, with the pointed title “Duty” (“Долг”),<sup>97</sup> described the veterans’ fight with bureaucratic obstruction, a situation very familiar to all Soviet readers, but made to appear positively tragic in this particular case. This article was significant also

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<sup>91</sup> Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War*, p. 217.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 178

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> M. Galeotti, *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's last war*, London: Frank Cass, 1995, p. 106.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example: “Informatsiya ob organizatsii. Permskaya kraevaya organizatsiya Obshcherossiiskoi obshchestvennoi organizatsii Rossiiskii Soyuz veteranov Afganistana”, *Permskii gorodskoi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii* [online database]. <[www.permgaspi.ru/tematicheskie-bloki/velikaya-otechestvennaya-vojna-1941-1945-gg-2/dokumenty-rsva.html](http://www.permgaspi.ru/tematicheskie-bloki/velikaya-otechestvennaya-vojna-1941-1945-gg-2/dokumenty-rsva.html)>, accessed 27 April, 2020.

<sup>97</sup> I. Rudenko, “Dolg”, *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, 26 February 1984, p. 4. The article was republished in the same newspaper after Rudenko’s death in 2016. <[www.kp.ru/daily/26618/3636808](http://www.kp.ru/daily/26618/3636808)>, accessed 2 June 2020.

because it was the first time since the beginning of the war when a journalist had openly talked about war casualties as an everyday reality in Soviet towns.

The reaction from the authorities at first was not at all positive. According to eyewitnesses, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* editor in chief Gennady Seleznev was summoned to a meeting of the Bureau of the Komsomol Central Committee where he was criticized for publishing the article. His critics said, among other things, that “*душманы стреляли в нас в Афганистане, а журналисты целятся в нас в Москве.*”<sup>98</sup> But a few days later, when the case had gone up the line in the usual way, the Party leadership decided not to try to silence the scandal but to use it as a propaganda tool. The Komsomol's central committee fell into line, announcing a campaign that was aimed to support “warrior-internationalists” and Great Patriotic War veterans. A wider discussion of the Afghan war and its casualties was still prohibited, but all military units serving in Afghanistan gained patrons (“*щедров*”) from local Komsomol organizations.<sup>99</sup> They established a network of local Unions of warrior-internationalists, a sort of Komsomol for ex-soldiers. It listed help to injured soldiers among its main goals but was organized mostly for ideological and propaganda work among them, in the attempt to control the grassroots movements that had started to emerge all over the country.

Using this unspoken permission for veterans' initiatives, in 1984, three years after his demobilization, one of my informants, Vyacheslav from the city of Bryansk, established a small local veterans' alliance, Askar (“a warrior” in Arabic). According to Vyacheslav, the alliance was established with the official assistance of the local city administration and became the fourth veterans' union in the whole Soviet Union. Its members received help from the state with medical services and welfare. Besides this work, they took care about the graves of 131 fallen Bryansk soldiers: “*Мы объезжали и смотрели все-все могилы, кто где лежит. Убирались. Сейчас такого нет, но тогда это было поставлено очень хорошо. У Дворца пионеров*

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<sup>98</sup> Y. Lepskii, “Izdaleka ‘Dolga’. Kak zhurnalistu Inne Rudenko udalos' rassekretit' to, chto partiinaya vlast' skryvala o voine v Afganistane”, *Novaya gazeta*, 25 December 2019. <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/12/25/83309-izdaleka-dolga>>, accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>99</sup> V. Reprintsev, “Vremya vybralo nas”, *Boevoe bratstvo*, no. 2, 2018.

*мы сделали тумбочку [с надписью, что на этом месте будет установлен памятник погибшим в Афганистане] из нержавеющей стали. На четвереньках ползали, копали сами саперными лопатками, цветы сажали. Дворец пионеров [т.е. Комсомол] нам помогал”.*



**Figure 2.** The First All-Union Rally of Young Reserve soldiers in Ashkhabad<sup>100</sup>

In 1987, more than 2000 ex-soldiers gathered in Ashkhabad on a First All-Union Rally of Young Reserve soldiers, held under the auspices of the Moscow Central Committees of the Party and the Komsomol. Officially, the gathering was announced as the launch of the Afghan veterans’ movement. However, the New York Times journalist Bill Keller, who was allowed to attend the gathering, suspected that in reality, it was organized “in an attempt to assert control over independent Afgantsy organizations [...], and to channel them in directions the party considers constructive”.<sup>101</sup> He described “Afgantsy in three-piece suits” telling him “about the

<sup>100</sup> Photo published in a social network, <<https://ok.ru/group55290467385367/topic/66199141143831>>, accessed 20 May 2020.

<sup>101</sup> B. Keller, “Home From Afghanistan: Russia’s Divisive War”, *New York Times*, 14 February 1988. <[www.nytimes.com/1988/02/14/magazine/home-from-afghanistan-russia-s-divisive-war.html?searchResultPosition=1](http://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/14/magazine/home-from-afghanistan-russia-s-divisive-war.html?searchResultPosition=1)>, accessed 24 June 2020.

deep love of the Afghan people for the Soviet Union”<sup>102</sup> and assumed that the veterans' groups “were an embarrassment and a potential rival to Komsomol”.<sup>103</sup> During the gathering, The Council of Military Reservists (“Совет ветеранов”) was created. According to Keller, veteran groups that choose to remain independent were now outside the law.<sup>104</sup>

Given the history of intervention into Great Patriotic War veterans' movements, Keller's assessment is convincing. Practically, the rally did indeed signify an attempt to monopolize the grassroots veterans' movements. They were, according to the plan, doomed to start functioning as one more layer of Soviet bureaucracy. The “Veterans' movement” would become something like the “Young Pioneer” organization, founded in 1922, which had transformed activist groups for children into an instrument of social discipline.<sup>105</sup>

As the head of Askar union, Vyacheslav also participated in the Ashkhabad gathering, and depicted it sarcastically. He pointed out the fake character of the event. According to Vyacheslav, most of the veterans who went to Ashkhabad were not yet adapted to the post-war reality and “*were still wound up about things*” (“*в душе было горячо*”). The meeting turned into a non-stop drinking party: “*Там Ашхабад вздрогнул, и они [местные жители] боялись выходить.... Там громилось всё на свете... Люди неадаптированные, ещё и поведение было не ахти*”. Finally, to make veterans calm down, Komsomol leaders told them that they suspected foes were hiding outside of the city, in a big hill. Drunken ex-soldiers, together with local militaries and TV-crews, stormed the hill: “*Они [организаторы съезда] там как бы пустили БТРы, танки, мы за ними бежали, стреляли холостыми патронами. Ролик сделали, показали [по телевидению]. Мы заряженные, мы высоту эту взяли... (...) Мы бегом бежали, потому что нам сказали, что кто-то там сидит. Голыми руками эту высоту брали. (...) Ну они [журналисты] сделали своё дело, всё красиво [сняли]*”.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> About this see, for example, Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing up in Russia 1890-1991*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

However, the plans of the Komsomol to take the veterans' movement under control came to nothing, firstly, because of the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in 1989, and, secondly, through the elimination of the Komsomol itself in 1991. Further, the expanded opportunities for so-called "informal associations" that was a central part of the perestroika programme acted as an incentive for veterans' associationist drives. The Law on Amateur Associations and Hobby Clubs (1987) and Law on Social Organizations (1990) provided a legal basis for veterans' unions, and after the formal state control disappeared, they mushroomed throughout the country.

The first alliance, the Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (SVA) was established in March 1989, just a month after the troops' withdrawal. Soon, after the collapse of the USSR, it was replaced by the Russian Alliance of Veterans of Afghanistan. At the beginning of the 1990s, it claimed to represent more than 300,000 afgangtsy;<sup>106</sup> as of summer 2020, the official figure was 500,000.<sup>107</sup> Among the founders of the Union were the Ministry of Defence, the Moscow Patriarchate, the Ministry of Internal Affairs amongst other organizations.<sup>108</sup> According to Mark Galeotti, the SVA leadership ran it in traditional, federal, Soviet style, and soon it became a "useful conduit for foreign aid and a convenient transmission belt for Kremlin decrees".<sup>109</sup>

Two years later, in 1991, came the founding of a second alliance, the Russian Fund for the Disabled in the War in Afghanistan. In 1997, Battle Brotherhood, organized by General Boris Gromov, appeared.<sup>110</sup> This last, helped by its backing from the high command, soon became one of the most influential veteran organizations. These were not the only associations founded

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<sup>106</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*, p. 104.

<sup>107</sup> "Simvolicheskoe Znamya Pobedy teper' khranitsya u veteranov Afganistana – Frants Klintsevich", *TASS News Agency*, 6 May 2013. <<https://tass.ru/interviews/1598471>>, accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>108</sup> A. Shchepetin, "Etapy stanovleniya obshchestvennykh organizatsii i voennykh veteranov Rossiiskoi Federatsii", *Srednerusskii vestnik obshchestvennykh nauk*, 2010, p. 191. <<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/etapy-stanovleniya-obshchestvennykh-organizatsiy-voennykh-veteranov-rossiyskoy-federatsii/viewer>>, accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>109</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, p. 115.

<sup>110</sup> The last commander of the Soviet 40th Army in Afghanistan, who became a state politician after the war.

at the time, but other unions were mostly fluid and short-lived. They appeared spontaneously but then merged into larger unions.

The aims behind the veterans' unions were threefold: economic, social, and symbolic. The economic aim was primary at the time when the unions were founded. Given the situation of budgetary deficit, the government, rather than supporting veterans financially, provided them with various fiscal concessions (a similar strategy was adopted with the Russian Orthodox Church). The veterans were granted tax exemptions for the imports of goods, customs exemptions on alcohol, tobacco and oil products, and tax relief on different sorts of financial entrepreneurship, so that they could organize small-scale private enterprises. For example, the Afganets club in Moscow ran a lucrative enterprise manufacturing footwear, with 40% of the profits set aside at the outset to support invalids and families of dead soldiers.<sup>111</sup> Many firms offered goods and services for fellow afgantsy or mobilised members of the public, from teaching martial arts to producing albums with songs about the Afghan war, as the Yaroslavl-based *Aist* enterprise did.<sup>112</sup>

Many other veterans united into small house-building cooperatives called MZhK (“Молодежный жилищный комплекс”, Youth Housing Complex). Their members built blocks of flats for their families, investing their own money, time, and labour. According to Mark Galeotti, MZhK became one of the more concrete expressions of afganets activism, with the first completed in Leningrad and accommodating 200 ex-soldiers.<sup>113</sup>

Focused on economic entrepreneurship, unions devoted part of their profits to support for the injured and disabled or the families of fallen soldiers. My informant Ali, from a Dagestan village called Leninaul, told me about a fellow soldier who had been heavily injured in Afghanistan, and became completely paralyzed a few years after coming back home. For more than 13 years, members of a local Afghan union have spent a part of the profits from their

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<sup>111</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, p.111.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. P. 112.

financial activities on supporting his family. Of course, only part of the profits went on philanthropic activities: Mark Galeotti calls the set-up “a characteristically Soviet mix of Robin Hood altruism and hard-headed self-interest”.<sup>114</sup>

Important as this economic side of the veterans’ movement was, I would take issue, all the same, with Galeotti’s statement that “economics lay at the heart of the Afghan movement”.<sup>115</sup> Besides providing business opportunities, military unions had a significant role as an institutional framework for dealing with state bureaucracy and obtaining social security for the union’s members. Afghan soldiers were officially recognized as veterans in 1995, according to the new law on veterans. But in practice they had to fight the bureaucracy to obtain the social benefits to which they were entitled, and unions were helpful in this. My informant Ali elaborated on the creation of his local military alliances in the following way:

*“Мы ради чего организацию создали? Я первым начал бегать за жилищными средствами [ветеранам выдавали сертификаты на жилье], только для себя начал когда. Другие не знали, многие не знали тогда. (...) И вот мы встречаемся с ребятами, друг спрашивает про деньги. Я документы сделал, а он только сейчас узнал. Ему сделал документы, другому, шестеро афганцев с нашего села — я взялся за них. (...) Меня спрашивают в Махачкале: “Тебе они зачем, ты им кто?” Тогда они предложили открыть организацию и от их имени защищать их права, и это было официально. Уже 16 человек в районе эти сертификаты получили”.*

All of the veterans whom I interviewed were confident that their union (or more broadly, solidarity) was crucial for obtaining state welfare. As Nadirbek, an afganets from Hasaviurt, the town in Dagestan, told me: *“Один — два человека идешь — ничего не делает [государство для ветеранов], толпой идешь — видит, что много, что-то решает”.*

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

The third aim of veterans' unions was to restore and maintain the symbolic status of veterans and their identity in a society that was wary or openly hostile to them. Unions started building war memorials, organized “youth military-patriotic education” classes and camps, held commemorative ceremonies and published numerous memoirs. The organizations thus had a broadly-based programme of social and political advocacy combined with welfare and self-promotion.

These activities allowed veterans to not only maintain a military fraternity but also to build and maintain their own war narrative, receive occasional tributes (or at least an acceptance) from society, raise their social profile and, as a result, derive “a meaning of their combat mission [...] and their military knowledge in the aftermath of the war”.<sup>116</sup> My informants told me that during their gatherings, they were persistently looking for a new narrative that they could present to the public and to themselves. Ravshan from Makhachkala told me that he instructed his fellow ex-soldiers not to expect civilians’ appreciation but to be proud of the fulfillment of their obligations towards the motherland:

*“Тут недавно один [бывший солдат] мне говорил, что какая-то женщина ему где-то сказала, что «я вас туда не посылала». Я говорю: “Конечно, она тебя не посылала; она тебя как может туда послать? Тебя Родина направила туда, страна твоя! Кто она [эта женщина] такая, чтобы тебя туда посылать? Ты ее можешь куда-то отправить. Приказ Родины ты выполнял”. Я вот так ребятам рассказываю, вот так надо говорить”. Nevertheless, this new narrative had not appeared until the 2000s, at which point a new factor influenced veterans’ alliances: the state.*

### **Veterans’ Self-Identity in 1980-1990: The Nihilistic Heroism of Brothers in Arms**

How did veterans themselves relate to the changes that they had to go through? How did the state rhetoric and societal attitude influence their self-identity? On 15 February 1989, the

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<sup>116</sup> Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory”, p. 108.

last Soviet soldiers left Afghanistan through the "Bridge of Friendship" between Afghanistan and the USSR. During the withdrawal of troops, more than 100,000 soldiers<sup>117</sup> came back to the Soviet Union, where they felt like outsiders, and tried to build a new civilian life amidst the fear and hatred of their compatriots. My informant Ahmed from Makhachkala described the contrast between the war and civilian life as a contrast between justice and injustice:

*“Там [на войне] справедливость ты делаешь. Твоя команда делает, нормальные мужики. А здесь [в мирной жизни] ты не сделаешь справедливость. Здесь есть, нету – ты ноль. Там есть люди другие в этой жизни. Которые тебе политику делают. Конечно, иногда злишься. Конечно, свои горские понятия иногда забываешь”.*

Analyzing official Soviet statistics from November 1989 (i.e. nine months after the troops' final withdrawal), Elena Senyavskaya found out that 3,700 afgantsy were already serving prison sentences, more than two-thirds were dissatisfied with their jobs and changed them frequently because of personal conflicts, 60% had drug or alcohol addictions and 75% were divorced or assessed their family relations as dysfunctional.<sup>118</sup>

All the Afghan war veterans whom I interviewed noted that the first years after the end of the war were the most difficult for them. The beginning of the 1990s was marked by a surge in the number of suicides, murders, addictions and various criminal incidents among their colleagues.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> R. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–89*. London: Profile Books. 2012, p. 34.

<sup>118</sup> Senyavskaya, *Psikhologiya voiny v 20 veke*, p. 92.

<sup>119</sup> In my work, I avoid discussing the “Afghan syndrome” in a clinical sense. The topic of PTSD and its consequences for Afghan veterans has been well researched. See, for example: B. Coalson, “The Trauma of War: Homecoming after Afghanistan”, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1 October 1993. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678930334006>>, accessed 21 May 2022; C. Merridale, “The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell-Shock in Twentieth-Century Russia”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2000, pp. 39-55; M. Zelenova, E. Lazebnaia, N. Tarabrina, “Psychological Characteristics of Post-traumatic Stress States in Afghan War Veterans”, *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, vol. 39(3), no. 28, 2014, pp. 3-28. Besides, I assume that social factors are no less important than psychological ones.

*“Многие погибли [в 1990х]. Или сами в себя стреляли, или вешались, или помахали друг другу кирпичом – ф-фить. По бухому. (...) До сих пор там у них в глазах шайтаны бегают.”*

This kind of social reintegration difficulty is quite common among ex-servicemen in many countries.<sup>120</sup> However, I consider that the adaptation of the veterans to postwar life was hampered also by the negative assessment of the war in the public discourse of the 1990s, and also by their interiorization of the later official state rhetoric of heroes who honorably fulfilled their international duty. As American Vietnam war veterans, they expected to receive an appropriate level of respect, yet society refused to consider afgantsy as heroes, and the state did not fulfill its obligations — either symbolic or material — towards them. For example, asked why so many ex-soldiers became alcoholics, veteran Ravshan from Makhachkala explained it by the loss of prestige of veterans after demobilization:

*“Просто в социальной жизни [ветеран] не может своё место найти. И вот ему обидно, что в Афгане он был человеком, который решает судьбы народа, для других людей. У него было оружие в руках, на танке сидел, на БТРах ездил. Ну, хозяином жизни вот он был, миллионы рублей, которые стоит танк, он водил, как личную собственность: что угодно он мог с ним делать, куда угодно поехать. А тут он элементарно никто, с ним не считаются, государство забыло, никаких льгот, ничего. И вот по этой причине спивается”.*

As Ravshan contends, serving in the army was prestigious in the late USSR. The veterans were not ready to accept the lack of public respect and the traditional masculine image of a hero in camouflage. Besides, the discrepancy between the state rhetoric at the beginning of the war and at its end and the gap between afgantsy welfare and the privileges of the Great Patriotic war veterans contributed to afgantsys’ feeling of abandonment and betrayal.

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<sup>120</sup> See, for example, a comparative study of the outcomes of veterans in eight different countries: M. Crotty, N. J. Diamant, M. Edele, eds., *The Politics of Veteran Benefits in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020.

Ravshan came back from his military service in Afghanistan to his home city of Makhachkala in 1989, in his early 20s. According to him, the world started to change right after his return home: *“Иномарки, джипы ездют, все становятся крутыми, богатыми... Все дворцы, особняки строят. Как вот так, думаю, жизнь повернулась. И это самое... хотел, конечно, идти в ногу со временем. Найти своё место в этом, сейчас который бушующий мир наступил. Конечно, пойти куда-то по профессии работать сварщиком уже не мог, с Афгана приехал боевой солдат... Обидно было: ты войну прошёл, а у тебя ничего нет, ты достоин большего. И хотелось добиться. Не отставать от жизни хотелось, вот что. Если был бы без боевого опыта, без Афгана, может быть, как-то по-другому бы относился. Хотелось не оказаться в нищете на дне этой жизни, хотя бы наплаву держаться, ты же боевой солдат. (...) Но удача и везение были не на моей стороне”*.

Originally a welder by profession, with two years of military service and suffering from heavy concussion, Ravshan struggled to find a non-manual job in his home city and went to Moscow. There he tried to open a food stall (“ларёк”) but did not succeed; he came back home one more time and started to forge metal gates and fences for the new houses of his more successful and wealthy compatriots. He had been working as a taxi driver for many years already but still regretted he was not able to make a business career. He is sure that, as a former death squad member, he was *“ожидал большего от жизни”*.

Like most of my informants, Ravshan refused to accept the idea that the Afghan war was disgraceful. All of my informants continued to assert the heroism of soldiers and their pride in participating in the war, and insisted on the necessity of the war and the indispensable role of the Soviet involvement in it:

*“[Я был горд,] что именно выбор пал на меня, что в такие сложные места отправляют достойных. В космос же отправляют только достойных, с улицы же не возьмёшь космонавта. Туда же [в Афганистан] попадают достойные люди,*

*становятся героями. И здесь я тоже ощущал себя, что мне вот такая честь выпала — служить”.*

As historian Jan Claas Behrends argues, the afgantsy developed their own nihilistic heroism, a sort of nostalgic nationalism, taking pride in their participation in a war that was ultimately lost.<sup>121</sup> When I interviewed ex-combatants several years after he published his article, their main narrative still was the same, and their sense of pride had become even stronger.

Yet for all this sense of pride, according to Vadim Volkov, the negative attitude of Soviet society towards the war in Afghanistan and its public condemnation made veterans feel disappointed and compelled to separate themselves from society and to unite in a community of former "brothers in arms".<sup>122</sup> As Serguei Oushakine claims, the appeal to an idealized community tested by blood and death is a standard response to one's own dislocation from the mainstream. Such postwar unity of soldiers is common to unsuccessful or unprestigious wars. For example, studies of American soldiers who participated in the Iraq war similarly indicated that it was solidarity with one's comrades, the bond of trust developed in the battlefield, that motivated the soldiers the most.<sup>123</sup>

The emotional experience of the war thus separated the "imaginary community" of veterans from the rest of society but closely connected them with each other. Oushakine uses the term "community of loss", one that walled itself off from the outsiders.<sup>124</sup> This term seems very valid to me, and my fieldwork showed that such veterans' communities exist in all cities where at least a few veterans live.

Former servicemen describe their relations as a deep bond, something like a close family relation: *“Это все симбиоз какой-то. Это родственные отношения, я с братом своим,*

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<sup>121</sup> J.C. Behrends, "Some Call Us Heroes, Others Call Us Killers", Experiencing Violent Spaces: Soviet Soldiers in the Afghan War", *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 43, no.5, 2015, p. 729. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1048674>>, accessed 15 May 2020.

<sup>122</sup> V. Volkov, *Silovoe predprinimatel'stvo, 21 vek: ekonomiko-sotsiologicheskii analiz*, St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta, 2012, p.104.

<sup>123</sup> Oushakine, "Exchange of Sacrifices", p. 179.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p. 205.

*скажем так, меньше вижу и доверяю, чем им. (...) Мы всю жизнь вместе. Скажем так, жен путали. Но это в хорошем смысле, ну вы поняли. То есть, до такой степени, что всё в унисон. (...) Вот до такой степени этот коллектив, эта группа была – это с полувздоха, с полувзгляда, даже ничего не надо говорить”.* During the interviews, many of my informants used “we” instead of “I”.<sup>125</sup> The narrative of battle brotherhood has been a constant motive of wartime recollections and figured widely in my informants’ interviews also.<sup>126</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, the private and public narratives of the war employed by the veterans were appreciably different from one another. According to historian Michael Galbas, privately, in their communities and unions, ex-combatants insisted on the necessity of the war, while publicly they rejected the government’s public attribution of heroic status to them, and presented themselves as victims of state abuse. This was aimed at convincing state politicians to take moral responsibility for the veterans and their welfare and prevent the public from blaming the veterans for participating in the war.<sup>127</sup> Veterans’ memoirs and interviews published in the 1990s, which could be seen as counter-memory,<sup>128</sup> often represent stories about disempowerment, resentment, and victimhood, mixed with financial struggles.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> That is more common for those of my informants who served in Afghanistan. Those who served in Chechnya are more individualistic.

<sup>126</sup> Strikingly, later official Russian state propaganda adopted this narrative of battle brotherhood and started using it in commemorative events dedicated to the local wars. I write about this in the Chapter 2.

<sup>127</sup> Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory”, p. 116.

<sup>128</sup> I use Michel Foucault’s term. He defined counter-memory as an individual’s resistance against the official versions of historical continuity. See: M. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, D.F. Bouchard (ed.), Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

<sup>129</sup> See, for example, a typical memoir of a former soldier: “Когда получил в военкомате удостоверение на льготы, во, подумал, не забывают нас, Афганцев, льготы какие-то выдумали. И после того как женился, решил пойти насчет квартиры заявление подать, думал, без проблем все это, напишу - и поставят на очередь. Но мне сказал местком, что льготы эти пусть тебе предоставляют те, кто их придумал. Меня взяла злость, но этому придурку повезло, я как раз был трезвый в это время, и поэтому проглотил его слова и молча вышел, а про себя подумал, да кто ты такой, чтоб перед тобой пресмыкаться, подавитесь вы все этой хатой”. (V. Krivenko, ‘Kak pozhivaesh’, shuravi?’, *Art of War*. <[http://artofwar.ru/k/kriwenko\\_w\\_j/vk1.shtml](http://artofwar.ru/k/kriwenko_w_j/vk1.shtml)>, accessed 17 July, 2020.)

Feelings of a lack of respect and social insecurity caused an increase in the political activity of veterans. Historian Françoise Dose, who made a study of the involvement of servicemen in late Soviet politics, claimed that politicization of the armed forces had in any case occurred since 1989, when officers (only some of whom had war experience) started to go to the State Duma to present their views to the executive authorities and to influence public opinion, as well as engage with the beginning of military reform.<sup>130</sup> Natalia Danilova argues along similar lines that veterans went into politics mostly in order to exchange ideological support for “real” market value.<sup>131</sup>

In 1989, 82<sup>132</sup> ex-soldiers were elected to the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union.<sup>133</sup> Although this was not much in proportionate terms (only 3.3% of all votes), Françoise Dose claims that qualitatively it signaled an upheaval. Military men had entered the public political scene for the first time in Soviet history.<sup>134</sup>

Soon, afgantsy were participating in both new political parties and social organizations of the “left” and “right”,<sup>135</sup> although their own views, according to historian Yaacov Ro'i, were closer to the nationalistic end of the spectrum, even of those who were members of more left parties and movements.<sup>136</sup>

In the mid-1990s, Afghan-veteran and political structures merged. However, it is difficult to judge whether the afgantsy became better able to lobby for their own interests or were used by civilian political leaders for their own purposes.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> F. Dose, “The Military in Parliament, 1989-95”, *Russian Politics and Law*, vol. 35(5), 1 September 1997, p. 85.

<sup>131</sup> Danilova, “Victims and Heroes”, p. 908.

<sup>132</sup> N.I. Pikov, *Voyna v Afganistane*, Moscow: Voenizdat, 1991, p. 308.

<sup>133</sup> The highest body of state authority in the Soviet Union in 1989-1991.

<sup>134</sup> Dose, “The Military in Parliament”, p. 78.

<sup>135</sup> Ro'i, “The Varied Reintegration of Afghan War Veterans”, p. 44.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> N. Danilova, *Kollektivnye deistviya uchastnikov voiny v Afganistane v kontekste sotsial'noi politiki*, PhD thesis, Saratov State University, Saratov, 2004. <<https://www.disserscat.com/content/kollektivnye-deistviya-uchastnikov-voiny-v-afganistane-v-kontekste-sotsialnoi-politiki>> , accessed 17 June, 2020.

### **Criminal Activities: Veterans' "Own Afghan War"**

One of my informants, Ahmed, had a typical soldier's career. After returning from conscript service in Afghanistan, he went to war in Nagorno-Karabakh (1988-1994) and Abkhazia (1998), participated in both Chechen campaigns. When I asked whether he would have chosen another job if he had had a chance, Ahmed answered without hesitation: *"Нету другой работы. Ни специальности, ничего у тебя нету. (...) Если бы смог другую работу сделать – конечно, пошел бы"*.

At the end of 1992, over 30,000 veterans were registered as unemployed.<sup>138</sup> My interviews suggest that, feeling unwanted at home and abandoned by the state, most of the ex-servicemen found it easier to preserve their military identity and war habitus. This was one reason for their continuing attachment to the ethos and practices of the (now quite distant) past. Moreover, as sociologist Vadim Volkov claims, the experience of warfare gave ex-soldiers important physical and psychological advantages in activities that routinely use violence<sup>139</sup>. Consequently, ex-soldiers sought employment in power structures, criminal gangs, and the "hot spots" that erupted throughout the collapsing Soviet Union, from Tajikistan to Transnistria. For example, Vladimir from Moscow described his friend, also a veteran, who was not able to do any non-military type of job:

*"Да вот Толя этот экземпляр, приехал ко мне [в середине 1990х]. Он приехал с Киева и говорит: "Володь, надо где-то работать. Воевать уже негде, вроде. Там меня все время провоцируют..." "Ну ты чем занимаешься?" "Я машины тут одно время гонял с Германии, перегоняли, продавали, перегоняли, продавали". Ехал в Польшу, в Польшу к нему бандиты приставили [пистолет] ТТ к башке, говорят: "Отдавай машину, ключи и езжай, а то сейчас жизни лишишься". Они не знали, что попали, у него кличка Рембо*

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p. 88-89.

<sup>139</sup> Volkov, *Silovoe predprinimatel'stvo*, p. 100.

была. Он отверткой дал одному в глаз, забрал пистолет, всех перестрелял и уехал. Вот приехал. Это можно говорить, потому что его в живых уже семь лет нет. (...) И, приехав сюда, он говорит: “Где тут работа у тебя?” [Я сказал ему:] “У нас есть рынок. Работа у тебя будет такая: будешь получать три тыщи долларов, будешь у меня охранником, больше ты ничего делать не можешь”. Он походил, погулял. “Я, — говорит, — или в тюрьму сяду, или поеду где-нибудь завербуюсь воевать.”

According to psychologist Mikhail Reshetnikov, Rector of the East European Institute of Psychoanalysis and a former Afghan veteran, when he studied afgantsy in 1986-1997, up to 40% of those who returned from Afghanistan said that they were ready to fight for any army that gave them weapons.<sup>140</sup>

By late 1991, 70,000 veterans had found jobs in the Soviet armed forces; 14,000 had been recruited into the Ministry of the Interior, and another 20,000-22,000 into the emergency services, criminal investigation units, the prosecutor’s office and special squads.<sup>141</sup> Yaacov Ro’i provides examples of afgantsy who did not connect their lives with the army but sought to go to places where there were other sorts of risk and perils: Chernobyl after the explosion (1986), the scene of the earthquake in Armenia (1989).<sup>142</sup>

According to data provided by Vadim Volkov, in 1999, more than 50% of former soldiers (both from the Afghan and Chechen wars) then wished to work in the state or private security companies that had begun to spread all over the country.<sup>143</sup> As criminologist Federico Varese confirms, such companies were “staffed mainly by former officers of the KGB, the MVD, the

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<sup>140</sup> O. Beshlei, A. Glebov, “‘Ehto to zhe samoe, chto utilizirovat' atomnuyu stantsiyu’. Mozhno li vylechit' ‘afganskii sindrom’”, *Novoe vremya*, 15 February 2019. <<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/29770353.html>>, accessed 5 April 2022.

<sup>141</sup> Ro’i, “The Varied Reintegration of Afghan War Veterans”, p. 29.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Volkov, *Silovoe predprinimatel'stvo*, p. 104.

GRU, and veterans of the Afghan and Chechen wars”.<sup>144</sup> By the mid-1990s the largest of such organizations, called *Herat*, included more than 8,000 employees.<sup>145</sup>

Even while doing other types of jobs, many veterans tried to be involved in volunteering activities connected with policing. Since the end of 1990s, afganets Nikolai from Bryansk took part in a local Police Assistance Squad: “*Мы из афганцев у себя в районе собрали такой отряд. Тогда неважно [в смысле уровня криминала] было, как раз амнистии были уголовные, уголовников выпустили на улицу и их много было. Сейчас, мне кажется, намного тише. И вот мы, нас в отряде было восемь, шесть из них были афганцы. Я был комиссаром отряда в должности. Вот еще шесть лет мы помогали наводить порядок. Без оружия конечно. Я считаю, что мы нужные вещи делали*”.

After coming back from his fifth war, my informant Ahmed mentioned at the beginning of this section, managed to open a small security agency in his hometown of Makhachkala. He implicitly acknowledged a deeper link between military service and his current line of work: for many years, he has hired only war veterans in his security agency, and attributes this to their specific life experience and particular type of masculinity:

*“Афганцы и менты. Других не беру я. Это уже люди битые на этом деле, они знают [как] общаться с людьми, они знают психологию. С ними просто работать. Я их смело оставляю, могу уйти. Потому что я знаю, что будет спокойно”.*

Yet Ahmed himself also stigmatizes the *afgantsy*, reproducing the narrative about the unreliability of people with the “Afghan syndrome”. He states that he prefers to hire special services police officers who had fought in Chechnya and were not traumatized as much as soldiers in Afghanistan: “*Афганцы немного контуженные – менты более реальные*”.

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<sup>144</sup> F. Varese, *The Russian Mafia: Private Protection in a New Market Economy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 103.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

Predictably, numerous veterans turned poacher rather than gamekeeper, becoming involved in criminal activities.<sup>146</sup> Although none of the major post-Soviet criminal bosses was an afganets, the new Russian gangs that emerged in the 1990s everywhere in Russian cities had “a respectable proportion of veteran soldiers”.<sup>147</sup> Strikingly, some of contemporary veteran organizations emerged in the 1990s as criminal structures. For example, Vadim Volkov mentioned a union from Saint Petersburg called Afganvet which “was involved in informal security activities”.<sup>148</sup> According to local journalists, Afganvet illegally controlled a lot of shops and foot stalls in one of the city’s district.<sup>149</sup> This alliance still exists, owns several trade and security businesses<sup>150</sup> and unites more than 1,500 ex-soldiers.<sup>151</sup>

One of my own informants, Vladimir from Moscow, explicitly recognized his affiliation with a criminal gang and explained its establishment as grounded in the necessity to confront other bandits and criminals ensconced in state institutions and agencies:

*“Афганцев должны были уважать и бояться. Почему? Потому что власти не было. Надо было противостоять преступному миру, который в России ходил в тот период, когда везде перестрелки, бандитские разборки. И мы пришли к выводу, что надо самим защищаться. Нас никто не защитит. Милиции нету, никого нету. Надо было организовывать свои боевые дружины и давать отпор бандитам. (...) Жуткие времена*

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<sup>146</sup> The topic of ex-servicemen’s involvement in gangs and the affiliation of veteran associations with criminal structures is well studied. Hence, I am not going to elaborate on this topic in details. See, for example: M. Galeotti, “Private Security and Public Insecurity: The Rise and Implications of the Russian Security Industry”, *Crime and Justice International*, vol. 22, no. 95. November/December 2006, pp. 10–13.; M. Galeotti, “The Mafiya and the New Russia”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, no. 44/3, 1998, pp. 415–429.; F. Varese, *The Russian Mafia: Private Protection in a New Market Economy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; V. Volkov, *Silovoe predprinimatel'stvo, 21 vek: ehkonomiko-sotsiologicheskii analiz*, St. Peterburg: European University, 2012; Y. Kostyukovskii, “Kharakteristika organizovannoi prestupnosti sovremennoi Rossii”, *Peterburgskaya sotsiologiya segodnya*, no. 3, 2011, pp. 236–247.; O. Krishtanovskaya, “Nelegal'nye struktury v Rossii”, *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, no. 22/8, 1995, pp. 84–106.

<sup>147</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, p. 111.

<sup>148</sup> Volkov, *Silovoe predprinimatel'stvo*, p. 105.

<sup>149</sup> N. Nelyubin, “Samye nevinnye iz vsekh nevinnykh. Kogo lobbiruyut deputaty Gosdumy ot Peterburga”, *Fontanka*, 30 September 2019. <<https://www.fontanka.ru/2019/09/30/144/?feed>>, accessed 2 October 2020.

<sup>150</sup> Y. Shmyglevskaya. “Pod korolem larechnikov shataetsya tron”, *DP.ru*, 23 May 2008. <[https://www.dp.ru/a/2008/05/23/Pod\\_korolem\\_larechnikov\\_sha](https://www.dp.ru/a/2008/05/23/Pod_korolem_larechnikov_sha)>, accessed 2 October 2020.

<sup>151</sup> Afganvet website. <<http://www.afganvet.spb.ru/>>, accessed 2 October 2020.

*были. То есть война была такая, невидимая. Там [в Афганистане] хоть виден: вот враг, вот противник. А тут ни врага не видно, все улыбаются, а потом в спину тебе ножом».*

Vladimir's statement accords with the argument of criminologist Federico Varese, who claims that Russian mafia gangs of 1990s emerged in the vacuum created by state incapacity to deliver key political and social goods, such as security, justice and economic stability. According to Varese, the peculiar Russian transition to the market allowed legal and semi-legal providers of protection to flourish. Private protection firms responded to market incentives and offered protection to legitimate and non-legitimate businesses.<sup>152</sup> The Afghan gangs emerged the same way. In his interview, Vladimir states that he and his fellow veterans trusted neither the state nor other group organizations, and had to build their own unity based on values and moral norms which ex-military personnel had interiorized during their service.

Slowly, using their state financial benefits, military experience, determination to use force and social chaos of the 1990s, afgantsy became important actors in the world of violent entrepreneurship (using Vadim Volkov's term).<sup>153</sup> The Moscow association Herat and St. Petersburg's Afganvet, mentioned above, offered illegal protection services or racketeering, while many other veterans' enterprises were involved in alcohol and tobacco smuggling.<sup>154</sup> Presumably, criminal activities helped to distribute economic benefits among the veterans, tighten social bonds and achieve social mobility.

Until the end of the 1990s, my informant Vladimir was one of the heads of a huge "Afghan market" in the south-east Moscow district of Kuz'minki. Ex-soldiers provided protection to both traders and customers of the market. In his interview, Vladimir proudly boasted that veterans had cleared the market from pick-pocketing and petty theft:

*“У нас вывеска: «Рынок Афганец», все это самое, портрет мой висит с орденами, у нас люди должны приходить доверять (...) Мы взяли на работу бывших — по*

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<sup>152</sup> Varese, *The Russian mafia*, p. 188.

<sup>153</sup> Volkov, *Silovoe predprinimatel'stvo*, p. 120.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105

*картотеке пришли — те, кто сидел карманники. Мы им сказали: «Вот ваша группа, вы получаете зарплату достойную, ваша задача следующая — чтобы на нашей территории не было ни одного карманника». (...) Они взяли всех карманников, прогнали на другой рынок. На другом рынке воровство шло поголовно. Да, мы за всех не решим. (...) Но на своем участке мы вот это сделали”.*

According to Vladimir, part of the market’s profit was used to support the ex-soldiers: “У нас появились, например, большие деньги, рынок приносит деньги, я распределяю пачки что мы должны потратить на наших людей, на афганцев, кому-то помочь, кому-то, кто нуждается в помощи”. Nevertheless, according to the contemporaneous government audit, only between 9 and 24 percent of the union’s income was used for rehabilitation and reintegration programs. The remainder was spent on the private interests of veterans’ leaders.<sup>155</sup>



**Figure 3.** One of the buildings occupied by afgantsy in 1992<sup>156</sup>

<sup>155</sup> N. Danilova, “The Development of an Exclusive Veterans’ Policy: The Case of Russia”, *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 20, no. 10, 2009, p. 908.

<sup>156</sup> The photo is from E. Stoyanov, E. Pankrat'eva, “Muzhiki, nas budut rasstrelivat' iz tankov': istoriya afgantsev, kotorye zakhvatili doma na Taganskoi”, *BezFormata*, 11 January 2019.

Besides the protection services, unions resorted to direct acts of force, mostly unarmed. This includes the incident in 1992 where the Sverdlovsk Regional Branch seized blocks of flats after they had discovered that the flats they had been promised had been put on sale.<sup>157</sup> As I was told by my local informants, many of them live in the captured buildings to this day. Another similar case occurred in the city of Makhachkala in 1996. My informant Ahmed was among the organizers of the apartment block seizure:

*“Там была ситуация: нам стоили дом, говорили, это афганский дом. Когда поставили каркас, окна – тогда уже они решили отдать всяким [на продажу] (...) Собрал всех ребят: “Давай захватим этот дом, девятиэтажка у автостанции?” Кто-то испугался, кто-то не испугался. Я говорю: вперед. Захватили (...) Там еще есть два дома, как раз заканчивали [их строительство]”. Я говорю: “Мужики, один вопрос решили. Давайте еще эти два дома захватим?” (...) Не соглашались!”*

In 2019, when I was carrying out my fieldwork in Makhachkala, the captured building was still inhabited by veterans and their families, and widely known as “the Afghan house”.

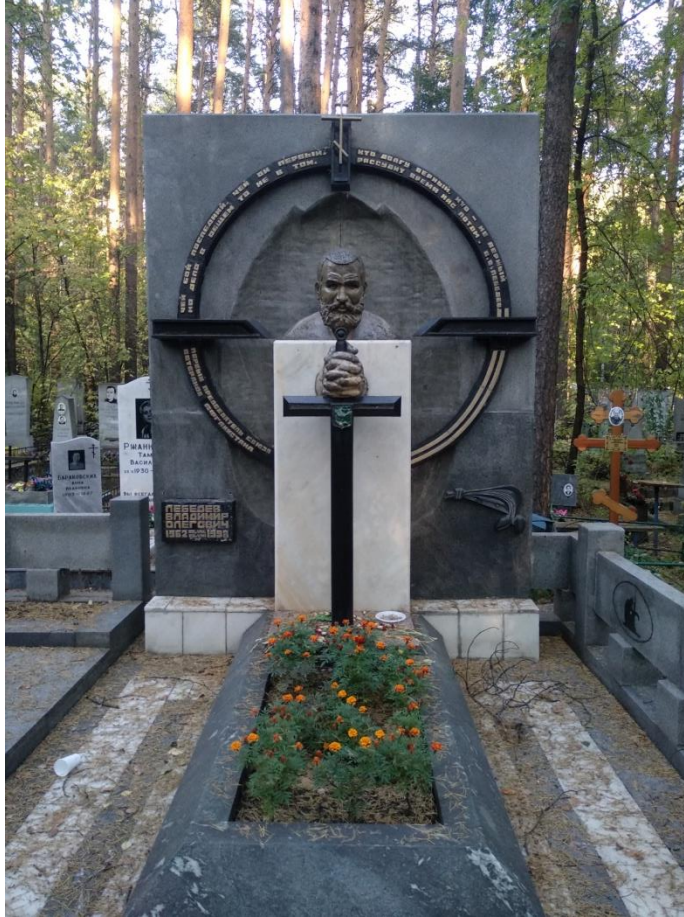
Nevertheless, such stories with relatively peaceful endings were exceptional. Two seminal events that brought the business activities of the Afghan unions to an ignominious end took place on the same day in 1994 and 1996. In 1994, the leader of the prominent Russian Foundation for Disabled Afghan War Veterans, Mikhail Likhodey, was killed in a bomb explosion. Two years later, thirteen other veterans, including a new head of the Foundation, were murdered in another blast during a commemorative gathering at Likhodey’s grave in Kotlyakov military cemetery. The investigation established that both of the hits were ordered by a previous chairman of the foundation, Valery Radchikov, whom other veterans accused of embezzling billions of roubles that never reached disabled veterans. Radchikov and several of the perpetrators of the murders did not live to see their trial. As my informant Vladimir, who

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<<https://ekaterinburg.bezformata.com/listnews/afgantcev-kotorie-zahvatili-doma/68472206/?amp=1>>, accessed 20 May 2022.

<sup>157</sup> See Introduction.

participated in the gathering in the cemetery but survived the explosion, told me: “We settled it ourselves” (“Разобрались сами”).



**Figure 4.** Vladimir Lebedev’s grave was designed as a Christian cross inside the sight of a firearm, homage to Lebedev’s criminal activities. The grave is located in Shirokorechenskoe Cemetery in Yekaterinburg next to the graves of other Afghan veteran criminal bosses<sup>158</sup>

Over time, more and more veterans ended up in prison or were killed in endless fights for access to resources and gang wars. For example, in 1998, Vladimir Lebedev, the leader of Sverdlovsk regional branch of RSVa and the main organizer of the Yekaterinburg residential

<sup>158</sup> The photo was made during the Yekaterinburg fieldwork in September 2021.

buildings occupation, was shot dead by three bullets while walking with his dog. The killer has never been found. Lebedev's predecessor Viktor Kasintsev and the head of another local veterans' union Yuri Al'tshul' also were assassinated.<sup>159</sup> The same year, five afgantsy were shot dead in the local office of RSVA in the city of Togliatti by, presumably, a crime gang which was fighting with the Afghan one for the local oil delivery market.<sup>160</sup> Two years later, a fight between different afgantsy took place in Veliky Novgorod. The head of the local military union *Legion* Valery Ivanov and two of its members were killed; six others were hospitalized with head injuries and gunshot wounds. As the investigators suspected, Afghan gangs from Novgorod, Moscow and St. Petersburg were fighting for shares in local drug trafficking or oil business<sup>161</sup> or for control over the rehabilitation centre for Afghan veterans.<sup>162</sup>

All these events negatively affected the reputation of veterans. Newspapers dubbed their fight for money, power and group loyalty the veteran's "own Afghan war".<sup>163</sup> According to Serguei Oushakine, by the end of the 1990s, the figure of the afganets had turned into a cliché, standing for an "uncontrolled, violent, mafia-connected man, tortured by his military past".<sup>164</sup>

Civilians were afraid to hire them everywhere with the exception of criminal gangs, which, according to my respondent Bulat from Chelyabinsk, readily accepted veterans because of their reputation for being devoid of fear and moral constraints. This further marginalized and radicalized ex-combatants and forced them to withdraw into a circle of brothers-in-arms, beyond which they expected to face hostility. It appears that the veterans internalized the idea of themselves as people who were uncontrollable, dangerous and stand out from society; several

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<sup>159</sup> K. Fiks, "Kriminal'naya karta devyanostykh. Legendarnye prestupleniya Ekaterinburga," *ETV*, 10 April 2017. <[https://ekburg.tv/articles/gorodskie\\_istorii/2017-03-10/kriminalnaja\\_karta\\_devjanostykh\\_legendarnye\\_prestuplenija\\_ekaterinburga](https://ekburg.tv/articles/gorodskie_istorii/2017-03-10/kriminalnaja_karta_devjanostykh_legendarnye_prestuplenija_ekaterinburga)>, accessed 5 October 2020.

<sup>160</sup> "Veterany Afganistana vylezli iz kletki", *Kommersant*, 16 April 1998. <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/196648>>, accessed 5 October 2020.

<sup>161</sup> "Novgorodskogo killera etapirovali po mestu raboty", *Kommersant*, no, 143, 11 August 2001. <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/278100>>, accessed 5 October 2020.

<sup>162</sup> S. Topol', "Afganskaya voina na novgorodskoi zemle", *Kommersant*, 25 January 2000. <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/138174>>, accessed 5 October 2020.

<sup>163</sup> S. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, p. 168.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

of my informants talked about themselves in these terms in my interviews. This probably explains the ease with which some informants told me about their criminal past or mentioned former comrades-in-arms who belonged to the mafia – they felt no moral discomfort about these factors.

Finally, in the late 1990s, the diffusion of violence, caused by a power struggle within veterans' groups, together with attempts by the state to regain the monopoly of violence, caused the cancellation of veteran's massive economic privileges and tax exemptions. According to Mark Galeotti, the rise and fall of the unions' business reflected the evolution of Soviet society as a whole, with its transition from formal groups to independent groupings, co-operatives and unions<sup>165</sup> – and then back.

Bereft of options and of state support, military unions were forced to merge. Only big players like RSVA of Battle Brotherhood managed to maintain political ties. Moreover, many veterans who had been part of the Afghan mafia were imprisoned, murdered, or simply fell by the wayside exhausted. Responding to my question about how former Afghan market employees were feeling nowadays, my informant Vladimir said: *“Спокойные времена настали. У нас основные люди на кладбище. На кладбище все спокойно”*.

### **Veterans' Unions in 2000s: Respect in Exchange for Loyalty**

As Mark Galeotti asserted, the afganets movement's dynamic reflected the evolution of Soviet society generally, with its transition from “informal groups” (“неформальные группы”, i.e. independent groupings), co-operatives and unions in the period of democratization, to a slow, sullen retrenchment, in the post-Soviet era, of associationism and freedom of assembly.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, p. 118.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

In the 2000s, alongside with the militarization of society, the level of support for the veterans' alliances from the governmental officials was also growing. The state considered it useful to co-opt veterans in order to build a new patriotic narrative and to create the image of a heroic Soviet struggle with international terrorism.

This process was not one-directional. As Rodric Braithwaite pointed out in his study of veterans, the goals of the unions ultimately coincided with the goals of the state. Just like the country's new authorities, who planned to restore a sense of pride in Russia's 20th century's history, heads of unions advocated the development of patriotism and respect for the armed forces and created an image of the war in Afghanistan as a heroic episode, during which soldiers performed their military duty and defended the Motherland.<sup>167</sup> Indeed, the narrative of the war built by veterans' organizations was reconstituted. Now it closely replicated the official one. For example, Boris Gromov, in his memoirs, repeated Putin's speech almost word-for-word:

*“Не существует оснований для утверждения о том, что 40-я армия потерпела поражение, равно как и о том, что мы одержали военную победу в Афганистане. Советские войска в конце 1979 г. беспрепятственно вошли в страну, выполнили — в отличие от американцев во Вьетнаме — свои задачи и организованно вернулись на Родину”*.<sup>168</sup>

Frants Klintsevich, the head of the Russian Union of Afghan Veterans and the State Duma deputy, used the same narrative in most of his interviews throughout the 2000s. He also actualized military discourse by comparing the war in Afghanistan with the Russian invasion of North Ossetia in 2008, and later, of Syria in 2016. According to Klintsevitch, all of these campaigns were caused by the threats to the USSR and then Russia from the global “West”:

*“Эта конфронтация нужна была, прежде всего, Западу, чтобы тем самым ослабить Советский Союз. (...) Мы тратили огромные средства на вооружение, на*

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<sup>167</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, p. 23.

<sup>168</sup> B. Gromov, *Ogranichennyi kontingent*, 2009.

<<http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/history/more.htm?id=10949893@cmsArticle>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

*холодную войну, потому что эта угроза была реальной. Они [Запад] всегда пробовали нас на зуб, и сегодня мы это видим и в результате конфликта, который произошел между Грузией и Южной Осетией. Эти действия были направлены, в первую очередь, на проверку военной дееспособности Российской Федерации».*<sup>169</sup>

Now, the Russian (and Soviet – the two were not distinguished) side bore none of the responsibility for conflict, while enjoying all of the moral benefits for the manner in which it was conducted – a position shared both by the leadership and by individual soldiers.

Though veterans enjoyed their new status of national heroes and their new self-image, built on the notion of the heroic and self-sacrificing defence of the country,<sup>170</sup> this came at an appreciable price. The state offered ex-soldiers a higher social status, recognition and public respect. In return, it demanded their loyalty. Military unions started to lose their independence as lobbying and advocacy channels. Metaphorically speaking, in the beginning of the 2000s their heads and the state cut a deal: veterans received welfare and recognition; the state received their loyalty.

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Natalia Danilova dates the beginning of the convergence of interests of the military unions and the state to the end of 1990s when high ranking officials and governors became an integral part of the commemoration ceremonies of the war in Afghanistan.<sup>171</sup> In 2004, a monument to the “warrior-internationalists” was erected in the huge Poklonnaya Gora Memorial Complex.<sup>172</sup> Previously, this had been dedicated to the Great Patriotic War alone. The erection of the new memorial was evidently intended to signal the inclusion of Afghans in the pantheon of “real”

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<sup>169</sup> “Dvadtsat' let posle voiny”, *Lenta.ru*, 2 September, 2008. <<https://lenta.ru/conf/afganistan>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

<sup>170</sup> Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory”, p. 120.

<sup>171</sup> N. Danilova, “Memorial' nayaversiya Afganskoivoiny”, *Pamyat' o voine 60 let spustya, Rossiya, Germaniya, Evropa*, Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005. <<https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/2005/2/memorialnaya-versiya-afganskoj-vojny-1979-1989-gody.html>>, accessed 21 May 2020.

<sup>172</sup> A. Semushkin, “Pamyatnik voinam-internatsionalistam (Moskva, Poklonnaya gora)”, *Pamyatniki v Rossii* website. <<https://pamyatniki-v-rossii.ru/pamyatniki/pamjatnik-voinam-internatsionalistam-moskva-poklonnaya-gora/>>, accessed 7 October 2020.

veterans, equal to those of the Second World War. The author of the monument was Salavat Shcherbakov, also hired by the pro-governmental Russian Military Historic Society for highly ideological monuments such as sculptures of Vladimir the Great and gunsmith Mikhail Kalashnikov.<sup>173</sup> In 2005, the next important event occurred. "The Committee of World War II Veterans passed the symbolic Victory Banner to afgantsy – ‘as their successors’".<sup>174</sup> In his interview concerning this ceremony, the head of the one of the largest veterans’ alliances, the Russian Alliance of Veterans of Afghanistan (Российский Союз Ветеранов Афганистана, RSVA) Frants Klintsevich proudly claimed that, after so many years, Afghan veterans had finally gained well-deserved recognition: *“Когда создавался РСВА, "афганцы" пришли к ветеранам ВОВ налаживать отношения. "Какие вы ветераны?" — услышали в ответ и получили от ворот поворот”*.<sup>175</sup> In 2009, a troops’ withdrawal commemoration ceremony, organized by the two most influential military alliances, took place in the Moscow Kremlin – the place where previously only the anniversaries of victory in the Second World War had been celebrated.

At the same time, throughout the decade, small soldiers’ unions were closed down. Large ones (such as Battle Brotherhood and RSVA) gradually turned into official, state-run organizations which later became more and more involved in politics – or, at least, in new kinds of public movements closely affiliated with the state.

In 2007, the majority of regional veterans’ unions supported the electoral campaign of Vladimir Putin and the pro-government United Russia party. The head of RSVA, Franz Klintsevich, became United Russia’s State Duma deputy and the deputy chairman of the Committee for Veterans’ Affairs (the leader of the second huge veteran organization, Battle Brotherhood, Boris Gromov, had already become the governor of Moscow Region).

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<sup>173</sup> More about Shcherbakov: K. Leonova, “Uchenik avangardista, lyubimchik ministra”, *Meduza*, 20 December 2017. <<https://meduza.io/feature/2017/12/20/uchenik-avangardista-lyubimchik-ministra>>, accessed 6 October 2020.

<sup>174</sup> “Simvolicheskoe Znamya Pobedy teper' khranitsya u veteranovAfganistana – Frants Klintsevich”, *TASS News Agency*, 6 May 2013. <<https://tass.ru/interviews/1598471>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

In 2011, after the pro-Putin's public All-Russia People's Front was established, military unions became among the first organizations to join it.<sup>176</sup> Later, within the framework of the Front, they conducted patriotic education sessions for schoolchildren,<sup>177</sup> with their army service propaganda and a new, militarized version of patriotism, which Vladimir Putin, at one of his meetings with representatives of the Front, called "крепкий фундамент будущего."<sup>178</sup>

What were veterans' motives to participate in all these events? Michael Galbas claims that veterans' unions became stakeholders of the new militarism and its values, and identifies two reasons why they followed the reconstituted official heroic canon: financial guarantees for the veterans' welfare; and enhanced social prestige.<sup>179</sup> I would argue, on the other hand, that although the unions still proclaimed "concern for improving the wellbeing"<sup>180</sup> of their members as one of their main goals, and their funding through the state grant system had steadily grown, the financial benefits did not reach rank-and-file members of the unions. The fusion of veterans' organizations and official institutions did not lead to any enhancement of the welfare system. We must accordingly look for financial benefits not to the overall membership, but to specific sections of it, or alternatively search for benefits that were not of a financial kind. Soon, veterans' wellbeing stopped being considered at all. In 2011, the Battle Brotherhood added to its statute a clause addressing "the establishment of a system of participation in protecting the national interests of the state"<sup>181</sup> as the main goal of its work. Since that period, the protection of veterans' rights and benefits has become one of the secondary goals.

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<sup>176</sup> "Obshcherossiiskii narodnyi front. Politicheskoe ob'edinenie na baze partii Edinaya Rossiya", *Lenta.ru*. <<https://lenta.ru/lib/14211400>>, accessed 20 May 2020.

<sup>177</sup> I write more about this in Chapter 4.

<sup>178</sup> "Geroi prodolzhayut provodit' uroki muzhestva v rossiiskikh shkolakh", *ONF web-site*, 16 January 2013. <<https://onf.ru/2013/12/16/geroi-prodolzhayut-uroki-muzhestva-v-rossijskih-shkolah>>, accessed 21 May 2020.

<sup>179</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and our Glory", p. 122.

<sup>180</sup> "Istoricheskaya spravka", Boevoe Bratstvo website. <<https://bbratstvo.com/ob-organizatsii/istoricheskaya-spravka>>, accessed 3 July 2020.

<sup>181</sup> "Ustav Vserossijskoj obshhestvennoj organizatsii veteranov Boevoe bratstvo", Boevoe Bratstvo website. <<https://bbratstvo.com/ob-organizatsii/dokumenty-organizatsii/ustav-vserossijskoj-obshhestvennoj-organizatsii-veteranov-boevoe-bratstvo-redaktsiya-do-14-iyunya-2016-g>>, accessed 21 May 2020.

Perhaps most strikingly, there were leaders of the veterans' organizations who opposed the adoption of new veterans' social benefits. For example, in 2006 Frants Klintsevitch was among the State Duma deputies who voted for the reduction of state benefits to the women who served in Afghanistan.<sup>182</sup> In 2008, he voted against the provision of free cars to war invalids.<sup>183</sup> Presumably, Klintsevitch acted from the standpoint of a governmental official and took into consideration the state budget, but not the welfare of fellow veterans.

Moreover, governmental recognition did not lead to any positive impact on veterans. All the negative issues such as disabilities, "Afghan syndrome" (i.e. PTSD among veterans) and problems with the adaptation of veterans to postwar life, compounded by ageing and the time that has now elapsed since return, still continued to exist, but were avoided in public discussions. The official commemoration was not followed by programmes of psychological or physical rehabilitation.

For example, one of my informants, Ali, came back from Afghanistan with serious concussion and brain and spine injuries. For many years, he has suffered from headaches and is not able to leave his home village in mountainous Dagestan. He claims that he has never received any rehabilitation or medical treatment. He is among the few among my informants who believe that psychotherapy could help ex-combatants, and wishes he could talk to a psychologist about his long-standing nightmares: *"По ночам встаешь, малейший шум — на штыках, ищешь автомат. Так у большинства"*. Unfortunately, psychologists have not been prepared to work with war veterans in Dagestan. I asked whether Ali had noticed any changes in the social security of veterans or results of veterans' organizations' activities in the 2000s. Ali hesitated and said that *"патриотическое воспитание организовали"*. That was the only difference that he observed.

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<sup>182</sup> A. Smolina, "Afganistan. Otkrytoe pis'mo Klintsevichu Frantsu Adamovichu", *Art of War*, 27 March, 2010. <[http://artofwar.ru/s/smolina\\_a/text\\_0440.shtml](http://artofwar.ru/s/smolina_a/text_0440.shtml)>, accessed 23 May 2020.

<sup>183</sup> Gosudarstvennaya Duma, *Stenogramma zasedanii*, vol. 7 (175), 2008, Moscow, 2010, p. 275.

Nikolai from Bryansk was also critical towards the contemporary unions, affiliated with the state, and advocated the first one, that had been organized and managed by veterans themselves. He claimed that in the early 2000s when he created a small veterans' organization, *“все [ветераны] были серьезные, красивые, молодые. А вот сейчас я встречаюсь, ребята те же, которые костяк был. Половина из них спивается. Почему-то. [...] Может быть, это из-за отношения этого, что мы были нужны как-то обществу, а сейчас мы никому не нужны. Тогда может быть, с работой было легче, с обыкновенной работой. А сейчас люди моего возраста, даже на два года моложе меня бухают по-черному. [...] Он [афганец] сунулся в одно место — нет работы, сунулся в другое — нет работы, сунулся в третье — и там тоже нет работы. Он пошел, взял бутылку и опять напился. И всё. Всем им можно [было бы] помочь”*.

Even while expressing regret for what he saw as a negative transformation of the veterans' community, Nikolai did not complain about the official federal alliances, of which he was also a member. It seemed that neither he nor most of my other informants expected the veterans' organizations to take care of the veterans. He regretted the vanishing of the first grassroots organizations but did not directly connect it with the rise of the new state-run ones.

### **Veterans' Self-Identity in 2000-2010: Defenders of the Homeland**

How did ex-combatants react at the changes in the official discourses and in the reforms of the veterans' unions? Most of my informants welcomed them fully. As Dagestani Ali stated, for many years local branches of veterans' unions had not received any money from the central committee, although they had organized a wide range of patriotic activities out of obligation, even when nobody had done it at the state level: *“Я работаю в школе без никакой зарплаты, без никакой этой... Я знаю, что я должен. Я с 1991 года в общественной жизни села”*.

Although Ali did not receive any salary for this job in the 2000s either, he was pleased to know his work finally had been appreciated and recognized.

The transformation of veterans' identity from victims to defenders of the homeland cemented their loyalty to the government. Most of the veterans acclaimed the new political course of cultural militarization and patriotism, and took the return of military glorification as a well-deserved reward and an opportunity to communicate with a wider community or society in general. Besides, there was now no longer any need to divide the private and public narratives.

At the same time, veterans discovered that their welfare and place in society depended not on their achievements in the past, but on service in the present. If earlier, soldiers could blame the state for what they saw as the unjust symbolic and socio-economic assessment of their status, by the end of the 2000s they themselves had to choose whether to continue serving and fighting on the ideological front, and obtain their social benefits as a part of a bigger veterans' group, or to refuse to participate in veterans' activities and organizations and to lose their privileges.

However, ex-servicemen also approved the narrative of battle brotherhood that had become the core of the state's perception of the veterans. Indeed, arguably, the official ideological accentuation of soldiers' unity made veterans' groups even more united. The battle brotherhood was, of course, a mythological construct – both at military bases in Afghanistan and in veterans' associations back home. Bullying and ill-treatment (or, using the Russian notion, “дедовщина”) was part of the everyday reality of the war.<sup>184</sup> For example, in 1987, 33% of the crimes identified in the 40th Army were connected with different sorts of bullying, and more than 200 soldiers were seriously injured by their fellows. Most of the afgantsy whom I interviewed claimed that they faced bullying in Afghanistan frequently themselves, or heard

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<sup>184</sup> For a detailed discussion of bullying in the Russian army see at F. Daucé, E. Sieca-Kozłowski, *Dedovshchina in the Post-Soviet Military: Hazing of Russian Army Conscripts in a Comparative Perspective*, Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2006.

about it from their fellow soldiers. As my informant Ravshan stated, during his service, bullying was “the rule of life”: *“Ну тогда я относился к этому, что это правило той жизни, того места, где ты находишься. Что так здесь устроено. Во всём Афганистане так происходит, во всех частях. Это реальность везде”*.

Like most of my informants, Ravshan gave numerous examples of bullying of soldiers in military barracks:

*“Я как раз часовым стоял ночью на посту и один солдат весь на карачках к воде полз, весь в крови, его, видимо, побили. И ещё говорят, бронежилеты надевали на солдат, на рядовых бронежилет и прикладом автомата били, если он провинился или заслужил это, жестоко обращались. Самострелы были, некоторые не выдерживали, сами в себя стреляли. [...] На выезде были в Кабуле. И там старослужащие избивали одного молодого. [...] И резко такая тишина наступила, я заглянул туда, что там происходит. А он лежал уже на полу, и все стоят над ним, и у всех такие потерянные лица. Я подошёл к нему, поднял его вот так, на руки держу его, и он как-то вот уже неживой и весь скатился вниз. А потом офицер зашел... Короче, они его до смерти избивали. Он умер. Он, можно сказать, на руках у меня скончался. А его списали на боевые [потери]»*.

However, even while acknowledging the prevalence of bullying, some of my informants persistently defended the notion of the battle brotherhood. Nikolai, former sapper, and now a businessman from the city of Bryansk, tried to justify bullying by claiming that violence in barracks did not affect soldiers’ unity in trenches:

*“Там [в Афганистане] не только война, там еще, наверное, вот это товарищество большую роль [играло]. Понимаете как, у нас тогда даже не было мысли о том, допустим там где-то слухавить, увильнуть [во время боя]. Конечно, я сужу по тому, как мои друзья поступали и как я сам в Панжетах где-то. И дедовщина была. Часто вопрос задавали “У вас что, и дедовщина там была?” Была. И очень жесткая была. Но,*

*когда на операцию выходили, она забывалась, ее практически не было. Она смягчалась там. Задавали глупые вопросы: “Ты же мог ему в спину стрелкнуть, если он обидел тебя” — это уже здесь на гражданке. Вопрос не по существу. Не мог. Не по-человечески”.*

Yet at the same time as employing the idea of “battle brotherhood”, many of my informants cast doubt on the contemporary unity of veterans. In both of the places where I conducted the main parts of my fieldwork, the republic of Dagestan and the Bryansk region, former soldiers blamed local veterans’ associations for internal conflicts, turf wars, fighting over state funding and so on. For example, in the city of Bryansk I interviewed two leaders of two local branches of RSVA. Both of them pretended to be the only leader of the local Afghan community, and blamed the other for corruption and dividing the local community.

Another local informant, businessman Nikolai, used to be a head of a small veterans’ group in 2000s. His organization mostly handled the patriotic education of schoolchildren. According to Nikolai, none of the bigger unions were ready to cooperate with it: *“Я пришел к областному председателю [афганского союза], не буду [его] называть, но так мы и не нашли понимания. То есть братства никакого нет, абсолютно. Всё на показуху. [...] Братство — это когда помогают по-настоящему, не словами, а делом. Вот и все. А у нас, в Брянске мне, например, ситуация не нравится. Куча организаций и толку никакого”.*

### **The 2010s. The Veterans as a Pillar of the Regime**

The second decade of Putin’s leadership, with its escalating militarization, patriotic mobilization, and two new military campaigns (in southeast Ukraine and in Syria) has been marked by a further justification of the war in Afghanistan and the wider use of war veterans as a pillar of government support.

The official war discourse has continued to evolve. During his meeting with Afghan veterans in 2015, Putin no longer criticized the war. The president claimed that Soviet troops faced “political Islam” and “extremist organizations that were supported from outside” (*“экстремистские организации, которые искусственно подпитывались со стороны”*). “We need to fight them, and we continue doing it” (*“С этим приходится бороться, и мы будем это делать”*) concluded the president.<sup>185</sup>

In 2014, Frants Klintsevich (RSVA) started a massive campaign that was aimed at challenging both the relation of the state and public opinion about the war in Afghanistan was. He asserted that it had frozen the drug trade and the threat of international terrorism that had now become “the main problem for all humanity” (*“проблема номер один для всего человечества”*). He also claimed that the Soviet Union was the first to “get a strike from jihad” (*“принял на себя удар джихада”*), which he claimed was nurtured by the intelligence services of Western countries, primarily the United States.<sup>186</sup>

The head of the RSVA also put forward a demand for the revision of the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR's 1989 decree denouncing the war as “politically motivated and not justified in historical perspective”<sup>187</sup> The offer sounded marginal at first, but quickly gained political support. The new narrative was announced on different TV shows on state channels. Members of Battle Brotherhood (another major state-affiliated military union) developed the legal framework for the revision of the assessment of the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan. On November 21, 2018, the State Duma duly denounced the decree of the defunct Soviet government as “inconsistent with the principles of historical justice”. The attitude to the war as “not justified” was also denounced. From now on, the war was to be considered just. In his speech on the 30th anniversary of the troops' withdrawal, the head of Battle Brotherhood, Boris

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<sup>185</sup> “Prezident Vladimir Putin vstretilsya s veteranami voyny v Afganistane”, *ITV.ru*, 15 February 2015. < [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2015-02-15/27203-prezident\\_vladimir\\_putin\\_vstretilsya\\_s\\_veteranami\\_voyny\\_v\\_afganistane](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2015-02-15/27203-prezident_vladimir_putin_vstretilsya_s_veteranami_voyny_v_afganistane) >, accessed 28 May 2020.

<sup>186</sup> “Klintsevich: sovetskie voiska v Afganistane ostanovili narkotorgovlyu”, *RIA Novosti*, 15 February, 2015. < <https://ria.ru/20150215/1047803340.html> >, accessed 2 May 2020.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

Gromov, advocating the new assessment, openly drew parallels between the Soviet fight against “Islamic fundamentalism” in Afghanistan and “the successful Russian campaign in Syria”.<sup>188</sup>

Notably, the public attitude towards then also has changed. Once every few years, the independent Moscow Levada Centre conducts an opinion poll about the attitude towards the war in Afghanistan. The last such survey was held in February 2020. Sociologists compared its results with the data of previous surveys, conducted since 1991. It turned out that over 25 years, the number of those who considered this war a “state crime” (“государственное преступление”) has decreased by one and a half times – from 69 to 44%. At the same time, the number of those who justified it even more noticeably increased, from 8 to 22%. The number of participants who were unsure (and perhaps not interested) also rose, from 23 to 34%. The authors of the survey attributed this to the growing moral indifference of Russian society to military violence and even with the growing immorality of Russian society.<sup>189</sup> I take a slightly different view, and assume that such results were more closely connected with the changes in public discourses about the war than anything else. Besides, the public was becoming more aware of veterans of local wars, since it had started seeing them at official events (like Victory Day and public holidays of all kinds), encountering them teaching children at schools<sup>190</sup> and reading the numerous interviews about their heroic deeds in the Russian media.

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<sup>188</sup> “Doklad predsedatelya komiteta po koordinatsii i sovmestnykh deistvii veteranskikh ob"edinenii geroya Sovetskogo Soyuza Gromova B.V. ‘O khode raboty po podgotovke k 30-letiyu zaversheniya vypolneniya 40-i armiei zadach v Afganistane”, Boevoe Bratstvo website. <<https://bratstvo.com/doklad-predsedatelya-komiteta-po-koordinatsii-sovmestnykh-deystviy-veteranskikh-obedineniy-geroya-sovetskogo-soyuza-gromova-bv>>, accessed 17 August, 2020.

<sup>189</sup> “Pamyat' ob Afganskoi voine (1979-1989)”, Levada Centre, 25 February 2020. <<https://www.levada.ru/2020/02/25/pamyat-ob-afganskoy-vojne-1979-1989/>>, accessed 20 May 2022.

<sup>190</sup> I write about veterans’ involvement in “patriotic education” of youth in Chapter 4.



**Figure 5.** Opolchentsy from Yekaterinburg before their departure to the Ukrainian Donbass<sup>191</sup>

Another important process that emerged simultaneously with the justification of the wars by the state was the recruitment of ex-combatants in new military campaigns, sometimes official, but mostly unofficial. This started in 2014, after the war in the Ukrainian Donbass broke out. Right up to the present, Russian officials have continued to deny that Russian troops were involved in the invasion of southeast Ukraine that followed the annexation of Crimea. What they have not denied was the involvement of Russian opolchentsy — volunteers, many of whom were ex-military men. Since the beginning of the war, veterans’ organizations have turned into informal recruitment centres for volunteers. During my fieldwork in the city of Ekaterinburg in 2015, I interviewed Vladimir Efimov, an Afghanistan and Chechnya veteran and head of the military detachment called "Volunteers of the Urals", which has fought in Donbass since March 2015. According to the veteran, the detachment, as well as many other

<sup>191</sup>The photo was originally published in E. Racheva, “Poezd No. 336. 52 chasa s dobrovol'tsami, kotorye edut s voiny”, *Novaya Gazeta*, no. 30, 30 April, 2015. <<https://novayagazeta-vlad.ru/2015/04/29/979/poezd-336.html>>, accessed 17 August, 2020.

units, was formed by the Sverdlovsk Regional Public Fund of the Disabled and Veterans of the Special Forces. Efimov claimed that the fund started sending people to Donbass from the summer of 2014.<sup>192</sup>

Apart from the fund, several other Yekaterinburg veteran organizations also sent people to Donbass. Alexander, an afganets from Bryansk, also told me that in 2014 he was responsible for sending Bryansk volunteers, some of whom were ex-combatants, to the frontline in Donbass. These activities violate the Russian law governing mercenaries, but the work of the military unions has never been checked. When I interviewed my informant, chechenets Alexei, in 2019, he claimed that veterans' structures were still hiring mercenaries through former soldiers: *“Боевое братство” региональное — это рекрутинговая компания, которая как раз на Донбас отправляет, в ЧВК Вагнера. Они просто всех держат на связи. У меня друзья [звонят] в то же боевое братство: “Че, есть где повоевать?” “Давайте, ребята, свои анкеты заполняйте, резюме пишите”. Документы раздают, как только началась война, они сразу туда подтягивают”*.

Alexei, a professional mercenary himself, was critical of such methods of hiring his fellow veterans. He blamed the unions for not providing soldiers with official documents which could help them in case of disability of injury. That defined his attitude towards the war in general, and indeed to the country's leader, whom he accused of using “underhand methods”: *“Это путинское время к сожалению, когда таким макаром пытаются решать вопросы, чтобы вроде как я непричастен. (...) Мне как-то эта война на Донбасе не интересна была. Даже не могу объяснить почему. Скорее всего, потому что я понимаю, что Путин такими методами паскудными войну ведет, если он вперся туда, он должен был туда войска ввести, взять людей под защиту”*.

By contrast, Muscovite Vladimir who, he claimed, was among the Russians participating in the annexation of Crimea, took great pride in the role of the afgantsy in such historical events.

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

According to him, their task should be a diplomatic one: to meet Ukrainian war veterans and to persuade them to defect to Russia. Notably, he called Ukrainian afgangtsy “our brothers”: *“Нам тоже оружие дали, у нас было все, что понравилось, но Клинецевич взял все это оружие, закрыл под ключ в оружейке, выставил часового, и мы объезжали все подразделения украинские, со всеми беседовали [не прибегая к вооруженным действиям] [...] Не [только] с ветеранами, кто-то учился в академии, с кем-то в Афгане был. Что значит: мы будем друг в друга стрелять? Братья мы. У нас Украинский союз ветеранов Афганистана. Командиры-афганцы, министр обороны у них в то время тоже афганец был”*.

Later, during my fieldwork in Bryansk and Tver, I found out that similar groups of veterans from both of these cities had been deployed to Crimea. Several of my informants proudly claimed they had participated in this mission. In Bryansk, bus driver and Afghan veteran Alexander told me about six local ex-combatants who had been dispatched to Crimea after the Moscow office of the RSVA alliance asked veterans from Central Russia to join and help with the Crimea seizure. Alexander's story sounds ridiculous, funny and tragic at the same time. Initially, he and six other afgangtsy left Bryansk in Alexander’s minibus and went to Moscow where they planned to take a military plane to Crimea. As it turned out, the planes were already not allowed to land there. Instead, the veterans were sent by plane to the Russian city of Anapa, where another local bus driver and afganets drove them to Novorossiysk. There the ex-soldiers took a warship which brought them to Sevastopol in Crimea. In total, the warship carried 180 passengers. Most of them were veterans from different parts of Russia, others were retired riot police officers, a group of sportsmen from Chechnya, and members of the notorious Moscow motor club Night Wolves. According to Alexander, on the way to Sevastopol, they all prepared themselves for a real war and a real fight, so finally a Chechen war veteran from Bryansk started panicking and asked permission to go home: *“Это была ночь, мы попросили его покинуть*

нашу команду. Он: “У меня денег нет, туда-сюда”. “Тогда поехали и молчи”. “Нет, не поеду”. Типа, денег дайте. “Ну, ты взрослый мальчик”. Я не дал”.

As Alexander proudly told me, in Sevastopol all veterans received weapons but never used them. They were asked to “work with civilians”: “to monitor the situation” and “to fight provocateurs”. For instance, once they took away cameras from young people (presumably, journalists) who were filming anti-Russian protests. Another time, they themselves were captured. Local pro-Russian militia mistook them for anti-Russian militia and surrounded them.

Alexander avoided answering my questions about what exactly veterans were doing there, but proudly acknowledged that Frants Klintsevich (the head of the veterans’ group in Crimea as well as the RSVA) “держал связь и с политическим руководством, и с армейским руководством у него была связь”. As well as alleging Klintsevich was the mediator with the army high command, he also claimed that the veterans’ intervention had been a success; he and the group “выполнял свою определенную задачу (...) Выполнил шикарно задачу свою. Потому что многих представили к правительственным орденам, не только то, что нам там вручили всем медаль ‘За возвращение Крыма’ и благодарности президента, а многие получили боевые ордена и медали”. When I asked why they received military medals if there were no military actions in Crimea, Alexander felt embarrassed and explained that military medals could be given for non-military activities too:

“Вы поймите, не всегда награждают орденом или медалью за то, что ты свою пролил кровь, или кого-то там в плен взял, или кого-то убил. [...] Наш отряд взял много складов с оружием, обнаружили схроны с оружием, с деньгами, с наркотиками, с взрывчаткой. [...] И финансы, и документация, и литература разная и прочее-прочее”

“А какая литература?”

“Подрывная литература. Организационная, литература подготовки. Разная. Разной направленности была найдена литература”.

When I asked Alexander how he himself explained the reasons for the Crimea annexation, he said that after the Maidan revolution he expected clashes in Crimea but was not able to explain to me the reasons for them. Then he suddenly blamed the US for “destabilizing the situation” but also did not elaborate on this point: *“Я уже знал, что произошло на Майдане. Я понимал, что могут начаться боевые действия. [...] Но я в то же время понимал, что это дело правое, эту ситуацию раскачивают америкосы, и если, я знал, что Крым многонациональный, что там обстановка еще круче чем... ну то есть может пойти такая резня. Такая резня может начаться.”*

Strikingly, several of my informants claimed that the US was actively participating in the war in Afghanistan in 1979-1989 (from the Afghani side) and even in the military operations in Chechnya (on the side of Chechen rebels). Part of them noted that they knew this even at the time when they were serving in these wars. Others acknowledged that they did not know it before, but heard of this recently. The number of ex-soldiers thinking this way noticeably grew since the beginning of my fieldwork. If in 2019 claims like “there were American instructors in Chechnya” or “the Soviet Union was fighting the US on the territory of Afghanistan” still sounded marginal, in 2021 I heard them from every second informant. Contemporary militarized and anti-US and anti-NATO public discourse significantly influenced veterans. Notably, when I asked Alexander about the reasons for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he used modern clichés currently in circulation for justifying the wars with Ukraine: *“братский народ”* and *“если мы туда б не вошли, туда б вошли американцы и под боком у нас стояли бы американские ракеты”*. His reasoning for the Afghan war and the Crimea annexation sounded very similarly and replicated the official narratives. Alexander also mentioned the US one more time, while proving the necessity to establish a War Veterans Ministry. My informant claimed that it already existed in the USA where it was a “powerful force” which united the veterans. He complained that Russia was not ready to create such force because (unlike the US, the enemy) it wants to “sow discord” and *“пилить бюджет”*.

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Apart from unofficial military work, since the end of the 2000s, veterans have repeatedly participated in pro-government political actions. Typically, they organized rallies or meetings dedicated to all major political events. For example, just after the end of the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, a rally was held in Vladikavkaz (the Russian city closest to the Georgian border) *Afgantsy against the war* (“Афганцы против войны”). During this rally, members of regional Afghan and Paratroopers unions “condemned the actions of the Georgian army in South Ossetia and expressed their readiness to support the refugees [from South Ossetia, a disputed territory between Russia and Georgia]” (“выступили с осуждением действий руководства Грузии по отношению к Южной Осетии и выразили готовность оказать всестороннюю поддержку беженцам”), and also “sent an appeal to the Georgian embassy demanding an end to the aggression” (“обращение с требованием прекратить агрессию в отношении Южной Осетии было направлено в представительство посольства Грузии»).<sup>193</sup>

In 2013, after the March of Millions, the major rally of the Russian opposition, the Russian Union of Afghan Veterans held a meeting which demanded criminal proceedings against the rally participants (later dozens of cases were initiated, and defendants were given prison sentences) and to quash the criminal case against the policemen who had beaten the participants of the rally (as did indeed happen).

In 2014, after the Crimea annexation and the beginning of the military campaign in southeast Ukraine, rallies “in support of the inhabitants of Crimea, fraternal people of Ukraine and against the fascist movements that want to seize power” (“в поддержку жителей Крыма, в поддержку братского народа Украины и против фашистских течений, которые хотят захватить власть.”)<sup>194</sup> organized by the RSVA were held in most Russian regions,

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<sup>193</sup> “Vo Vladikavkaze proshel miting ‘Afgantsy protiv voiny’”, *Informatsionnoe agentstvo Yuga*, 12 August 2008. <[www.yuga.ru/news/131380/](http://www.yuga.ru/news/131380/)>, accessed 17 August, 2020.

<sup>194</sup> “Miting v podderzhku Ukrainy”, *RSVAweb-site*, 13 March 2014. <<http://www.rsva-kstovo.ru/news/archive/details/5a907d01-4697-4b9c-b70f-36fde8066b1a>>, accessed 17 August, 2020.

including small provincial towns like Kstov<sup>195</sup> in Nizhny Novgorod region or Novomoskovsk<sup>196</sup> in Tula region.

In 2019, after several street political protests in Moscow, the RSVA and other veterans' groups organized a concert dedicated to the Russian Flag Day (“День российского флага”). The patriotic event was held in Sakharov Avenue, a broad and imposing thoroughfare, and exactly the same place where opposition leaders planned to organize a rally “for fair elections and in support of political prisoners”.<sup>197</sup> The Moscow city hall rejected the proposal to allow the opposition to use this location, due to the veterans' gathering.

All of these events were widely advertised, and covered by local media. Most of them purported to be grassroots activities organized by local veterans' groups, but I am certain that all of them were initiated by the central offices of veterans' unions together with government officials. Together with other pro-government organizations, large military unions have turned into contractors carrying out the ideological orders of the authorities and have received state funding in return.

However, a few examples of truly grassroots initiatives have emerged. In September 2014, in the midst of the war in southeast Ukraine, the RSVA branch from the small Bezhitsky district in the city of Bryansk organized an anti-war rally. Approximately 10 to 15 people gathered in the Lenin square under signs that read "A second Afghanistan is unacceptable" (“Не допустим второго Афганистана”) and "Soldier-internationalists are against the war with Ukraine" (“Воины-интернационалисты против войны с Украиной”).<sup>198</sup> The head of the union and the organizer of the meeting, afganets Vladimir Barabanov wrote on the website of his alliance:

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> “Miting v podderzhku zhitelei Kryma i naroda Ukrainy proidet v subbotui v Novomoskovske”, *Tul'skie novosti*, 14 February 2014. <[https://newstula.ru/fullnews\\_123668.html](https://newstula.ru/fullnews_123668.html)>, accessed 20 August, 2020.

<sup>197</sup> F. Rustamova, S. Goryashko, “Veterany-afgantsy i geroi Rossii provedut v subbotu miting na prospekte Sakharova”, *BBC*, 19 August, 2019. <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-49398998>>, accessed 20 August, 2020.

<sup>198</sup> “V Bryanske proshel piket protiv voyny s Ukrainoi”, *Bryansk Today*, 5 September 2014. <<https://bryansktoday.ru/article/13076>>, accessed 20 August, 2020.

*“Мы, ветераны, всегда против войн, их начинают политиканы, а расплачиваются простые люди. Когда заканчивалась наша война, власть смогла найти нужные слова, пообещав, что «второго Афганистана не будет». Гибель тысяч наших ребят не была бы бессмысленной, если бы эта война предотвратила будущие войны (...) Насстораживает воинственная, грубая риторика высшего руководства. Готовность ‘мочить в сортире’ до ‘кровавых соплей’ ради своего имиджа и террористов и заложников, и правых и виноватых, давить все и вся. Ссоры с соседями. Конфронтация с Европой и Америкой. Подавление оппозиции. Великую страну должны уважать, а не бояться”.*<sup>199</sup>



**Figure 6.** The only anti-war meeting organized by veterans’ – in Bryansk.<sup>200</sup>

Despite the small number of participants, the rally was covered by most of the local media. Baranov and his supporters planned to organize another anti-war event a week later, but the new rally was prohibited by the local administration. The city hall claimed that it was the RSVA

<sup>199</sup> “O nas”, *Bezetskoe otdelenie RSVA web-site*. <<http://rsvabryansk.ru/o-nac/>>, accessed 20 August, 2020.

<sup>200</sup> The photo was originally published in “V Bryanske proshel piket protiv voyny s Ukrainoi”.

central board which questioned it.<sup>201</sup> Later, Baranov tried to challenge this legally contentious decision in court but lost.

I travelled to Bryansk to meet Vladimir Baranov. In his interview, he said that he was still proud of his meeting and happy that organized it on the day when the Minsk Agreements were signed: *“Мы сделали хорошее дело, за которое потом не стыдно будет. И, извините, те же украинцы мне скажут: где ты был в то время? Сидел под диваном? А я скажу: я был против, и всегда был против, и никогда не буду за войну. (...) В этот день как раз Минские соглашения [подписали]. Мы очень довольны, что мы капельку, может, небольшую, может, запоздалую, в тот положительный процесс - а мы этого и требовали, чтобы прекратить военные действия – мы и произвели”*.

We met in Vladimir’s flat in Bezhitskiy district. I noticed that the entrance of his apartment block and the walls in the staircase were covered with paint. I asked what had happened. With a laugh, Vladimir explained that at night before his protest, someone had covered all the walls of the building with graffiti saying a fascist and a traitor lives there. The people who wrote the graffiti started knocking on Vladimir’s door at 6 am but he did not open it, being on his guard for potential threats: *“Кто-то начал звонить, в 6 утра. Я не стал открывать, потому что у меня задача [была] – доехать до митинга. Машину поставил в другом месте. Расклеивали какие то листовки... Ну, там, как обычно, типа, фашист, предатель родины, продался украинским бендеровцам – через «е». Ну, может политтехнологи. Может еще кто-то. Их пыталась поймать [полиция], потому что они подъезд изгадили. По сути [написанного у полиции] возражений не было. Ну, я со смехом к этому отнесся, потому что... даже почерком красивым написали”*.

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<sup>201</sup> “Vlasti Bryanska zapretili miting protiv voiny s Ukrainoi”, *Bryansk Today*, 12 September 2014. <<https://bryansktoday.ru/2014091213330/society/Vlasti-Bryanska-zapretili-miting-protiv-voyny-s-Ukarinoy.html>>, accessed 20 August, 2020.

## Conclusion



**Figure 7.** My informant Vladimir made a small museum of the Afghan war in the office of his veterans' union. It has four mannequins in military Afghan uniform; all of them have the face of Vladimir Putin. As my informant explained, “потому что Путин наш друг”.<sup>202</sup>

In this chapter, I have analyzed the discursive, political and social shifts of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and the relations between ex-military personnel, society and the state throughout this period. I have considered the growing rapprochement between veterans' organizations and state projects, and the trade-off of control and financial support, and also the changing views of veterans, who have assimilated their own sense of themselves as a

<sup>202</sup> The photo was taken during my fieldwork in Moscow in autumn 2019.

“brotherhood” to slogans about “brotherhood” in a geopolitical context, and become increasingly susceptible to patriotic and xenophobic rhetoric.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, in the context of the collapse of the USSR as a political entity, changes in the economic system and the loss of the state's monopoly on violence, the inglorious end of the Afghan war gave rise to several important effects. At first, the state disengaged from interacting with veterans; no politicians wished to be associated with the lost war. In order to gain the support of the public and ex-servicemen, state officials declared the Soviet-Afghan campaign meaningless but hailed its participants as “heroes who had carried out their duty to the last”. However, the ex-soldiers did not accept this rhetoric. In response to this limited support from the state, they presented themselves as victims, betrayed and abandoned first by the Soviet state and later by the new Russia. Such a public image was intended to help them make the state responsible for their wellbeing. At the same time, among themselves, veterans continued to assert their heroism and pride in participating in the war.

Since the beginning of the first presidential term of Vladimir Putin in 2000, a move to militarization and patriotic mobilization has started. This process attracted more attention to the recent military campaigns, and a new discourse of the war in Afghanistan emerged. Vladimir Putin characterized the Afghan campaign as a “just war”, linked the idea of “international duty” with the defence of the homeland, and claimed that Soviet soldiers had gone to Afghanistan to fight international Islamic terrorism. Moreover, if previously the state discourse had focused on the suffering of the veterans, now it stressed their unity, self-sacrifice and brotherhood. The commemoration of the war in Afghanistan began to be used as a tool for nation-building, and its soldiers have become well-respected members of society. However, the Great Patriotic War remained the main war in the new state discourse.

After the end of the war in Afghanistan, failing to find their way back to a non-militarized and often hostile society, veterans preserved their military identity and often sought employment in power structures or “hot spots”. In the 1990s, feeling that the state was not

coping with its monopoly on violence, the ex-soldiers became important actors in the world of violent entrepreneurship.

Later, they acclaimed the new official patriotic narrative. Most of the veterans felt undervalued and humiliated by the state in the 1990s, and hence were highly susceptible to the offers of participation in different patriotic state activities in the 2000-2010s.

The transformation of the ex-soldiers' identity from victims of the state to defenders of the homeland assigned them much more prominence and leverage, cemented their loyalty to the government and fostered a strong social cohesion within the veterans' groups.

At the end of the 1980s, ex-soldiers had taken the initiative in creating alliances that provided an institutional frame for veterans' self-help, protected their interests in obtaining social benefits, and helped them to restore and maintain their symbolic status of war heroes. Later, at the beginning of the 2000s, with the implementation of the new state discourse and veterans' active participation in state initiatives, the convergence of the interests of the military unions and the state began. Veterans' associations started to lose their independence and switched from social work to an ideological role. Veterans enjoyed the new status of national heroes but had to pay for it. One can conclude that veterans' alliances and the state cut a sort of deal: veterans received welfare and recognition; the state received their loyalty.

For its part, ex-soldiers' loyalty became a valuable asset for the state legitimacy. In the second decade of Putin's leadership, the escalating militarization of the political system led to the revision of the public's attitude to the Afghan war and the use of veterans and their unions as a central pillar of government support. From the middle of the 2010s, former soldiers have been used as a tool to organize pro-government rallies and support state initiatives. They have obtained state permission for a regular and legal show of force. Threatening the political opposition, suppressing protests (even among their own peers, as the Bryansk case showed) and showing that any public activities which run counter to the state politic of patriotic mobilization will be punished, veterans' organizations have transformed into a new state power structure and

contributed to the overall institutionalization of violence. By supporting and funding veterans' unions, the state has achieved a new loyal and united structure of veterans' communities that can be used for both propaganda and enforcement goals.

## CHAPTER 2

**“My name is Yura the Fascist, I Have Gone through Two Wars, if I Kill You, I Won’t Get in Any Trouble”. The Consequences of the Chechen Wars:**

### **Routinization of Violence, Militarization of the Political Elites**



**Figure 1.** Moscow Interior Ministry troops (OMON) in Chechnya in 2000. Due to the frequent rotation, most of the troops serving in OMON passed through Chechnya. Afterwards, soldiers with combat experience returned to their cities and continued police work with civilians.<sup>1</sup>

In 2014, after the beginning of the war in Ukrainian Donbass, nine veterans of the Chechen wars, living in the city of Bryansk, went there to fight as members of the volunteer militia. Before leaving the city, they came to visit their comrade-in-arms, former paratrooper Roman. He was very sad to know they were leaving: *“Да блин, говорю. А у меня ноги [не двигаются]. Они и так настолько перебиты, а потом еще здесь попало, тут попало [осколком]... Я*

<sup>1</sup> Photo was published on twitter <<https://twitter.com/HistoryConflict/status/1130530159914815488>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

*тут по общежитию без костыля, а так [хожу с костылем]. А то бы с ними [уехал]. [...] Так солидарны мои ребята. У одного юридическое [образование] и, по-моему, экономическое. И он поехал тоже, в первых рядах поскакал”.* I asked Roman if these nine veterans came back from Donbass to Bryansk or settled down there (I used the Russian verb “осели”). Roman misheard: “Сели? [попали в тюрьму]. Не, вернулись. Многие здесь уже [в Брянске] позже сели.” It is remarkable that the question he thought I’d asked provoked no surprise in Roman at all.

I was visiting 47-year-old Roman in the dormitory where he had got a room after coming back from Chechnya. Dark, dirty and dilapidated, it had as its only decoration a big flag of the paratrooper’s battalion that Roman served in, with a paratrooper’s blue beret on it. Roman said he wanted to serve in the army since he was a child. He knew that civilian life was not for him; in the army with direct orders and discipline he felt in the right place. He served in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1989-1990 as a conscript, came back to Bryansk and signed a contract to serve in the No. 101 police battalion in Chechnya: “Мне хотелось, хотелось, хотелось [служить]. На гражданке побыл – ну, не мое. Ну, охраной занимался, грузчиком. Даже гробы делал”.

Roman had in fact come back from Chechnya partially disabled. With a severely injured leg and shellshock, suffering from insulin-dependent diabetes, he now rarely left his room and was not able to work. He got a small military pension which he almost entirely sent to his former wife (whom he had divorced after the war) as child support. He was left with about 5,000 rubles (60 pounds) per month, and was grateful to his more successful comrades-in-arms, who occasionally sent him some money. The head of the local War Invalids’ Organization, Vyacheslav, promised to help Roman with getting some social security or even a flat, but in return, Roman was supposed to participate more in the “patriotic education” of children or other events organized by the Invalids’ Organization. I was present during a telephone conversation in which Vyacheslav, an afghanets himself, told Roman that he was not doing enough to earn his future flat.

Previously, Roman had had an old push-button mobile phone, but recently his sister had bought him a smartphone so he could call his comrades-in-arms: *“Чтоб я мог лицом к лицу с однопольчанами разговаривать”*. According to the interview, Roman was entirely focused on his past. His circle of friends consisted of former combatants only; his dreams were mostly about the war: *“Чаще бывает [во сне], что я опять на ногах, опять в форме, среди бойцов и техники этой бегаю.”* While meeting with friends, he talked about nothing but the Chechen wars, so his current girlfriend called them all “aliens”: *“Она говорит: вы инопланетяне. Собрался тренер мой, товарищ с Кубани приехал, кум, брат. ‘Вот вы сидите, говорит, один чуть на mine не подорвался. В другого пушка стреляла’. [...] Ну мы рассказываем, кто, чего, как и где и кто кого откуда вытащил. ‘Это я не понимаю. Чё вы смеетесь? Вы больные. Вы инопланетяне какие-то. Там убивали. А вы смеетесь’”*.

Roman’s girlfriend had been his student many years before, when he used to teach sports classes in a local Young Paratroopers Club. She lived in another dormitory with her son, so the couple did not have a place to move in together. Roman told me that he wanted just two things in life: his own flat, so he could settle down with his girlfriend and have more children. And a new war to fight.

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Despite the fact that the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya have much in common (the long duration of the hostilities; the remoteness of them from Central Russia; the hushing up of the course of military actions; the large number of victims both among the soldiers and civilian population; the lack of rehabilitation programmes for veterans), the traces they left on society differed significantly. The fates of the two generations of veterans and military commanders, and the attitude of society towards them, were also radically dissimilar.

In this chapter I will look at how, at the beginning of the 2000s, the military violence left the borders of Chechnya, and a wave of brutality against ethnic minorities started. Hatred against Chechens among former combatants, many of whom served on the police force or the riot

police, was manifested in ethnic cleansing in different regions of Russia. The routinisation of violence also caused a rise in brutality against the Russian population. The mass media and human rights activists started talking of “chechenisation” of the country.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the official discourse did not discourage ethnic violence, and used the aggression of the Chechen veterans as a tool for forging the image of the “enemy” in the society. Besides, from the end of the 1990s, the generals who had been in charge of the wars began to be entrenched in the establishment. Many of them started political careers, and the new elite with military backgrounds began (despite their losses on the battlefields) winning the electoral wards.

If in the previous chapter of my thesis, I considered the relations between the state, the community of afgangtsy and their military alliances, here I would like to look at the impact on society more broadly caused by the two Chechen wars. I argue that as a consequence of this war, violence was institutionalized and routinized, a case that I shall demonstrate using my interviews with veterans of the wars in Chechnya, as well as media publications from the era.

The topic of the war in Chechnya is fairly well developed in the historiography<sup>3</sup> (social and political processes in contemporary Chechnya are studied much less). There are also a few publications dedicated to reaction to the war in society,<sup>4</sup> consequences of this war for the Russian army (for example, rapid growth of brutality and ethnic tensions)<sup>5</sup> or contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> A. Cherkasov, “Chechenizatsiya Rossii”, *EJ*, 30 January 2005, <<http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=55>>, accessed 15 April 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: M. Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014; A. Le Huérou, A. Merlin, A. Regamey, E. Sieca-Kozłowski (eds.) *Chechnya at War and Beyond*. Routledge, 2014; A. Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999; O. Orlov, A. Cherkasov, *Rossiya — Chechnya: tsep' oshibok i prestuplenii*. Moscow: Zven'ya, 1998; R. Sakwa, *Chechnya. From Past to Future*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; V. Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> E. Pain. “Vtoraya chechenskaya voina i ee posledstviya”, *Regiony Rossii v 1999 godu: Ezhegodnoe prilozhenie k “Politicheskomu al'manakhu Rossii”*. Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2001. <<http://www.ru-90.ru/content/э-паин-вторая-чеченская-война-и-ее-последствия>>, accessed 10 March 2021.

<sup>5</sup> P. Baev, “Chechnya and the Russian Military: A War Too Far?”, *Chechnya. From Past to Future*. Anthem Press, 2005.

Russian politics: changes in the political system of the country and its foreign politics.<sup>6</sup> However, there are very few publications focused on the legacies of the war for Russian society, for example “the spread of the Chechnya syndrome throughout other regions of Russia”<sup>7</sup> in the 2000s or brutality of riot policemen coming back from frontlines to their police units and continuing using war violence. Human rights activists and journalists called it “chechenisation of Russia”.<sup>8</sup> I am trying to partly fill this gap in this chapter.

### **The First Chechen War: a Story of Individual and Collective Sacrifices**

The first military campaign in Chechnya broke out at the very end of 1994. Just as with the war in Afghanistan, it started abruptly. This time, the state did not seek the support of Russian society and made almost no effort to prepare an ideological basis for the war or to mobilize the public.<sup>9</sup> Just as my Afghan respondents did, Chechen soldiers joined the war without being aware of its reasons and the scale of military activities. Accordingly, none of them was motivated either to fight in Chechnya or avoid fighting; none had an image of the enemy figure before coming to the frontline. According to one of my respondents, a policeman named Sergey whose brigade had been sent to Grozny at the very beginning of January 1995, he realized what he was facing only after he was given the task of gathering the corpses of his predecessors — the police brigade from the town of Maikop, wiped out during the storming of Grozny a few days before:

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<sup>6</sup> A. Malashenko, D. Trenin, *Vremya Yuga: Rossiya v Chechne, Chechnya v Rossii*. Moscow: Moscow Carnegie Centre, 2002; E. Pain, “The Chechen War in the Context of Contemporary Russian Politics”, *Chechnya. From Past to Future*, London: Anthem Press, 2005

<sup>7</sup> S. Markelov, “Russia’s ‘Filtration System’”, Robert Amsterdam personal site, 4 April 2007. <[https://robertamsterdam.com/stanislav\\_markelov\\_-\\_russias\\_filtration\\_system](https://robertamsterdam.com/stanislav_markelov_-_russias_filtration_system)>, accessed 28 March 2021. This short article is one of very few examples of writing on this topic. Others are written mostly by journalists and are dedicated to exact cases of police or military violence.

<sup>8</sup> A. Cherkasov, “Chechenizatsiya Rossii”, *EJ*, 30 January 2005, <<http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=55>>, accessed 15 April 2022.

<sup>9</sup> More about this: N. Rostova, “Pervaya televizionnaya voyna”, *Rastsvet rossiiskikh SMI. Ehpokha El'tsina, 1992-1999*, <[www.yeltsinmedia.com/articles/Chechnya](http://www.yeltsinmedia.com/articles/Chechnya)>, accessed 4 July 2020.

*“Ничего не известно не было. Слышали, что войска ввели, что там уже есть погибшие. [...] То есть, мы представляли примерно с чем столкнёмся, но не думали, что до такой степени, что это артиллерия и система залпового огня [будет использована в Чечне]. Мы думали, что там беспорядки”.*

However, the war in Chechnya had two crucial differences from the Afghan one. Firstly, it was never officially classified as a war (although it of course was called this way by the public; there has been no way of preventing civil society from using the term ‘war’). From the legal point of view, the first Chechen conflict was considered an operation to “restore constitutional order”, while the second, begun in 1999, was labelled an “anti-terrorist operation in the North Caucasus”.

Such undeclared wars are very typical for modern warfare. For example, the USA has not declared wars since the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> According to Charles Dunlap, since the middle of the twentieth century, declarations of war have largely fallen into disuse. In the interstate level, it happened due to the introduction of nuclear weapon and the establishment of the United Nations which largely obviated the need for individual nations to declare a war. For example, the long-lasting US invasions to Vietnam and Korea have never been declared as wars. Non-international armed conflicts are usually declared wars only when hostilities reach a certain level of intensity, which happens very rarely.<sup>11</sup> But although it was not unusual and not a violation of international rules, the unofficial status of the Chechen wars substantially influenced combatants. They were not covered by the law on veterans.<sup>12</sup> Later the same problem arose with the soldiers of the wars in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. This fact not only deprived veterans of the possibility of obtaining relevant social benefits, but also left them without symbolic practices and

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<sup>10</sup> See more about this in R. Värk, “Declared and Undeclared Wars”, *Journal on Baltic Security*, 2017, no. 3(1), pp.25-31.

<sup>11</sup> C. J. Dunlap, “Why Declarations of War Matter”, *Harvard National Security Journal*, 30 August 2016. <<https://harvardnsj.org/2016/08/why-declarations-of-war-matter>>, accessed 9 April 2022.

<sup>12</sup> The Chechen wars were added to the list of “operations outside Russian borders” as late as 2002. Only afterwards were veterans finally included in the “On Veterans” law, giving them legal status and financial compensation.

commemorative rituals. They were not able to base their individual and collective identities on their veterans' status. Moreover, the wars' lack of official status deprived participants of possible recognition by society and the state. According to sociologist Elisabeth Sieca-Kozlowski, the absence of markers showing the nation's gratitude to the soldiers resulted in the worsening of their trauma.<sup>13</sup>

From the psychological perspective, the "Chechen syndrome" was also more dangerous than the Afghan one due to the lack of recognition of soldiers as veterans and the more or less non-existent support for their rehabilitation.<sup>14</sup>

The second important point which characterized the Chechen war and differentiated it from the Afghan one was the attitude towards the soldiers, most of whom were conscripts. Both media and society struggled to find a significant ideological or political basis for the war that might justify the casualties. In the absence of any convincing explanations of the war, and after the collapse in the public mind of the Soviet concept of "military duty" ("воинский долг"), the conscripts began to be perceived not as aggressors (unlike those who had served in Afghanistan) but as random victims. Thus, the Russian media described them as "зеленых, необстрелянных, которые стали первыми жертвами".<sup>15</sup> For example, even prominent war correspondent Elena Masyuk, known for her anti-war stance, wrote about Russian conscripts as innocent victims of the state, rather than perpetrators:

*"Видела, как в деревне Аллерой к чеченскому командиру Ханкалу приходил российский солдат – просить еду. А в каких окопах, в каких землянках всю зиму провели солдаты? Не зря нам не разрешали эти землянки снимать. Какими они вернутся с войны, наши*

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<sup>13</sup> A. Le Huerou, E. Sieca-Kozlowski, "A 'Chechen Syndrome'? Russian Veterans of the Chechen War and the Transposition of War Violence to Society", *War Veterans in Postwar Situations: Chechnya, Serbia, Turkey and Côte d'Ivoire*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> E. Senyavskaya, *Psikhologiya voyny v 20 veke: istoricheskii opyt Rossii*, Rossiiskaya politicheskaya ehntsiklopediya. Moscow, 1999, p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> Rostova, "Pervaya televizionnaya voina".

парни? <...> Мы пишем о войне, показываем ее ужасы, а государство, несмотря ни на что, как убивало, так и продолжает убивать”.<sup>16</sup>

As Serguei Oushakine convincingly noted, the war emerged as a story of individual and collective sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> Compassion for the conscripts defined the media discourse and replaced the missing ideological component of the war. Likewise, Valentina Melnikova, the head of the Russia-wide NGO, The Union of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, told me in an interview, one of the main factors which determined such an attitude to the war was its free, uncensored coverage by Russian and foreign media:

*“В Чечне все начиналось публично и продолжалось всю первую войну публично. Все, начиная с ноября 1994 года, когда чеченцы взяли в плен фигову тучу этих солдат и сказали: "Приезжайте, забирайте своих солдат, офицеров и погибших, мы отдадим". И туда поехали журналисты, туда поехала Памфилова, туда поехал Щекочихин, Адамович<sup>18</sup>, туда поехали родители, даже офицерские. И это все было публично. И потом все показывали по телевизору. Тела в Грозном, две с половиной тысячи погибших, которых собаки ели, потому что этот Квашнин<sup>19</sup> не хотел объявлять перемирие двухчасовое, чтобы родители забрали тела погибших и все остальное. Все это было по телевизору”.*

Strikingly, later, in his memoirs, President Boris Yeltsin mentioned the possibility of freedom of speech restrictions (“дни были очень острые, когда каждый антивоенный репортаж по телевизору воспринимался моими помощниками как предательство”)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I. Rudenko, “Prekrasnaya dama v bronzhilete”, *Zhurnalist*, 1996, cited in: Rostova, “Pervaya televizionnaya voina”.

<sup>17</sup> S. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009, p.134.

<sup>18</sup> Russian politician, former deputy of the State Duma Ella Pamfilova, representative of the Congress of People's Deputies, prominent journalist Yuri Shekochikhin and commissioner for Human Rights in the Russian Federation Sergey Adamovich Kovalyov travelled to Chechnya in 1994 to secure the release of Russian prisoners of war.

<sup>19</sup> Anatoly Kvashnin, at that time first deputy chief of the Russian Armed Forces.

<sup>20</sup> B. El'tsin. *Prezidentskii marafon*. Moscow: AST, 2000.  
<<http://www.lib.ru/MEMUARY/ELCIN/marafon.txt>>, accessed 10 March 2021.

but claimed that he abandoned this idea, fearing that it would have changed the way the country developed.



Figure 2. Independent Russian “Общая газета”, criticizing Boris Yeltsin for starting the war in Chechnya.<sup>21</sup>

The attitude to the war became even more negative after mothers of soldiers started going to Chechnya to bring back their missing sons. Soon, women united into a huge movement, registered their NGOs and organized the Moscow – Grozny “March of Mother’s Compassion” (1995).<sup>22</sup>

Local grassroots mothers’ organizations emerged all over Russia, even in small provincial towns, as Valentina Melnikova described in her interview to me:

*“В маленьком городишке, какой-нибудь приволжской области есть две-три [...], там есть люди. Потому что все в 1994-1995 году поднялись. [...] Потом уже, когда журналисты показали, что там происходит, что там за война и сколько там гибнет людей, кого туда кидают и как с ними обращаются, народ уже очень быстро спохватился и в декабре-январе уже обращались по поводу целых частей, которые собирались отправлять в Чечню”.*

<sup>21</sup> Rostova, “Pervaya televizionnaya voina”.

<sup>22</sup> The history of the Committee of Soldiers Mothers, <<https://ksmrus.ru/text/istoriya-ksm-rossii>>, accessed 18 May 2020.

The Soldiers' Mothers' evidence, including photographs of young boys who had been killed, further contributed to the presentation of soldiers as victims, and, as Natalia Danilova claims, represented their deaths as family tragedies rather than a phenomenon of national significance.<sup>23</sup> A deputy of the Russian State Duma, speaking out against the war in 1994, called fighting soldiers "baby-conscripts" ("малыши-новобранцы") and "18-year old snot-nosed boys who do not know how to handle a machine gun yet" ("18-летние сопливые пацаны, которые еще не научились с автоматом обращаться").<sup>24</sup>

The rise in soldiers' perceived victimhood increased the level of perceived risk attached to military service. According to Valentina Melnikova, during the First Chechen War, The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers received many requests from women all over the country who asked what they could do to save their sons from conscription. Some of these women were mothers of babies and toddlers.

Natalia Danilova has cogently argued that a key factor in reactions to the Chechen War was that in 1990s Russia earlier ideological values were discredited, but new national values had not yet crystallized. Pro-government sources struggled to find an ideological justification for the death of servicemen and fell back on dedication to military duty. However, this justification was unsuitable for the legitimization of the deaths of conscript soldiers, for whom military service was the result of a compulsory call, rather than a duty voluntarily complied with. The deployment of conscripts predetermined the media representation of Russian soldiers in general as victims of war.<sup>25</sup>

The process also worked the other way round: On the societal level, the first Chechen war greatly increased resentment of mass conscription. Partly because of the war, partly due to the widespread military hazing, draft-dodging became socially acceptable and advice on how to

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<sup>23</sup> N. Danilova, "The Development of an Exclusive Veterans' Policy: The Case of Russia", *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 20, no. 10, 2009, p. 905.

<sup>24</sup> Stenogramma zasedaniya Gosudarstvennoi Dumy, 13 December, 1994, <<http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/node/3123>>, accessed 15 April 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Danilova, "Victims and Heroes", p. 64-65.

avoid army service began to appear in mass media. Against the background of annual conscription figures at around 180,000 people, the average number of draft evaders in the mid-1990s was 20-25,000, while in 1998 it reached 36,000.<sup>26</sup>

Parents of conscripts started queuing at the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers' doors, asking for help in finding legal ways of draft evasion. As Alexei Levinson, sociologist and senior researcher at Russia's leading polling organization, the Levada Centre, claimed, an amazing phenomenon of mass non-conformism arose: almost half of the adult population of the country began to recognize failure to comply with the law on universal conscription, a serious criminal offence, as a reasonable and legitimate form of behaviour.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, the atmosphere in the army drastically changed. According to political scientist Pavel Baev, army barracks became infested with ethnic tensions and unprecedented brutality, which reflected the nature of combat operations in Chechnya. The pattern of rotation of composite units exposed a large proportion of soldiers, most of all those in the ground forces, to the extreme violence that became typical of that war.<sup>28</sup>

The war with its massive use of heavy artillery and many cases of friendly fire, battles in mountainous terrain and difficult climatic conditions, significantly affected the mental state of the combatants. In 1996, a Russian military psychiatrist's study of Russian recruits who participated in the first Chechen war showed that proportionally, there had been more victims of psychiatric disorders in Chechnya than in Afghanistan. Of 1,312 soldiers examined, 72% were found to suffer from psychic disorders such as insomnia, lack of motivation, intense anxiety, neuro-emotional stress, fatigue and hypochondriacal obsessions.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Malashenko, Trenin, *Vremya Yuga*, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> A. Levinson. "Armiya kak institut sotsializatsii", *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost'*, no. 4, 2014, p. 63-70.

<sup>28</sup> P. Baev, "Chechnya and the Russian Military: A War Too Far?", *Chechnya. From Past to Future*. London: Anthem Press, 2005, p. 124.

<sup>29</sup> T. L. Thomas, C. P. O'Hara, "Combat stress in Chechnya", *Voennyi Meditsinskii Zhurnal*. no. 4, April 1996, p. 37-40.

## The Second Chechen War: Incomprehensible Events in a Remote Geographic Province

I would like to use the seventh of August 1999 as the starting point of the new decade. On this day an Islamist group from Chechnya led by warlord Shamil Basayev invaded the republic of Dagestan,<sup>30</sup> and the Second Chechen War (or, officially, the “military operation in the North Caucasus”) began.

The tide of the Second Chechen War was significantly different from the first one. The all-out use of tanks and other armoured vehicles was replaced by devastating artillery fire and air attacks; the scale of destruction of civilian items and the number of civilian casualties increased.<sup>31</sup> Hostilities were succeeded by “*зачистки*” (“clean-up” operations) on an enormous scale. Throughout the war, Russian forces massively and repeatedly violated human rights, practicing illegal detentions, torture, disappearances, summary executions, and collective massacres of both the civil population and combatants.<sup>32</sup> Chechnya became a place where violence was institutionalized as a method of solving political problems.<sup>33</sup>

The wave of violence against the enemy was reflected in an escalation of violence in military barracks; suicides, murders, and armed group escapes became a common feature of the army’s life.<sup>34</sup>

The official discourse on the Second Chechen War also changed substantially. According to Emil Pain, the Director of the Centre for Ethno-Political Studies in Moscow, after the end

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<sup>30</sup> H. Womack, “Rebels Stage New Invasion of Dagestan”, *The Independent*, 6 September 1999, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/rebels-stage-new-invasion-of-dagestan-1116858.html>>, accessed 7 May 2022.

<sup>31</sup> E. Pain, “Vtoraya chechenskaya voina i ee posledstviya”, *Regiony Rossii v 1999 godu: Ezhegodnoe prilozhenie k “Politicheskomu al'manakhu Rossii”*, Moscow: Moscow Carnegie Centre, 2001. <<http://www.ru-90.ru/content/э-паин-вторая-чеченская-война-и-ее-последствия>>, accessed 10 March 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Le Huerou, Sieca-Kozlowski, “A ‘Chechen Syndrome’”, p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> *Militsiya mezhdru Rossieii i Chechnei. Veterany konflikta v rossiiskom obshchestve*. Moscow: Demos, 2007, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Baev, “Chechnya and the Russian Military”, p. 124-125.

of the first war, the federal authorities considered the loss of the information war as their main error. Therefore, they set as one of their main goals to shape public perception of the war and to gain support for military actions against Chechen separatists and the campaign to keep Chechnya within Russia.<sup>35</sup>

Media coverage of the Second Chechen War changed drastically. Putin's government learned from the information defeat in the first Chechen war. Political analysts Alexey Malashenko and Dmitriy Trenin have argued that it adopted the experience of the information blackout practiced by the United States during the conflict in the Persian Gulf and NATO in the Kosovo conflict.<sup>36</sup>

In September 1999, State Duma deputies adopted a decree that limited the ability of journalists to obtain and publish information from the military zone.<sup>37</sup> High-ranking military officials started working with journalists directly, pursuing the coverage of the war in the way they wanted. Moreover, the administration established a government public relations office, The Russian Information Centre (Rosinformtsentr), to shape stories about Chechnya. Former Press Minister Mikhail Lesin sponsored laws making it more difficult to report on the war.<sup>38</sup> The Independent Russian Glasnost Defence Foundation called these state efforts "informational blockade" and complained about numerous attempts on the part of the federal security services to persecute and intimidate correspondents reporting on the war.<sup>39</sup> As Malashenko and Trenin

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<sup>35</sup> E. Pain, "Vtoraya chechenskaya voina i ee posledstviya".

<sup>36</sup> Malashenko, Trenin, *Vremya yuga*, p. 155.

<sup>37</sup> "Postanovlenie Gosudarstvennoi Dumy Federal'nogo Sobraniya Rossiiskoi Federatsii 'O situatsii v Respublike Dagestan, pervoocherednykh merakh po obespecheniyu natsional'noi bezopasnosti RF i bor'be s terrorizmom'". 15 September 1999. <<http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&prevDoc=102152046&backlink=1&&nd=102061736>>, accessed 12 March 2021.

<sup>38</sup> More information: "Casualty Sensitivity in a Post-Soviet Context: Russian Views of the Second Chechen War, 2001-2004", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 123, no. 1, 2008, p. 44.

<sup>39</sup> "Chechenskaya informatsionnaya voina nabiraet oboroty", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 28 January 2000. <<https://iwpr.net/ru/global-voices/chechenskaya-informacionnaya-voyna-nabiraet-oboroty>>, accessed 14 March 2021.

demonstrate, the battle for the war coverage limited not only journalists' access to information from the battlefield, but freedom of speech in the country in general.<sup>40</sup>

As a result, the media coverage of the military campaign changed significantly. Analyzing publications of the official media, Emil Pain notes that the war in them was deliberately portrayed as mundane, through the use of professional military jargon. For example, according to media sources, the air force in Chechnya did not bomb villages, and the artillery did not fire on them either – they "worked on settlements" (*“работают по поселениям”*). The city of Grozny was not “stormed” – “a special operation”<sup>41</sup> took place there.<sup>42</sup>

Combatants also turned invisible and lost their agency. Newspapers routinely published news about combat losses but never mentioned the soldiers’ names.<sup>43</sup> Even the number of casualties was subject to dispute throughout the 2000s.<sup>44</sup>

According to Vladimir Panyshkin, the military correspondent of *Kommersant* newspaper, during the first Chechen war and the beginning of the second one, corpses of dead soldiers were sent to their home towns and buried communally by local military authorities, with large memorial services. After 2001, soldiers were brought to their families and buried privately, one by one: *“Ужасный закон массовой информации и формирования общественного мнения заключается в том, что гибель 20 солдат — беда, а гибель одного солдата не беда. И если 20 раз похоронить по одному солдату, то это 20 раз не беда. Война ушла с глаз долой, про войну стало возможно забыть”*.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Malashenko, Trenin, *Vremya yuga*, p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> This cliché appeared in Russian official mass media again after the invasion of Ukraine has started.

<sup>42</sup> E. Pain, “Vtoraya chechenskaya voina i ee posledstviya”.

<sup>43</sup> A typical example: A. Klyuev, “Samye bol'shie poteri v Chechne s nachala goda”, *Izvestiya*, 18 May 2004. <<https://iz.ru/news/290088>>, accessed 16 April 2020.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example: “Bez vesti pogibshie”, *Novaya gazeta*, no. 66, 8 September 2003, <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2003/09/08/17316-bez-vesti-pogibshie>>, accessed 16 May 2020; V. Mykhin, “Dolzhnyu chet dannykh o gibeli voennosluzhashchikh v goryachikh tochках do sikh por otsutstvuet”, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 10 October 2007, <<http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2007/0305/gazeta039.php>>, accessed 16 May 2020.

<sup>45</sup> V. Panyushkin, “Vtoraya chechenskaya”, *Kommersant Vlast'*, no. 30, 2 August 2004, p. 69. <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/494139>>, accessed 16 May 2020.

In her interview with me, Valentina Melnikova (the head of *The Union of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers*) explained that the censorship crackdown finally led to almost no coverage being seen on state media:

*“Все, что там было, выводилось через федеральные каналы до какого-то момента, до 2001 года. Потом просто все захлопнулось, информация перестала быть доступной для людей. Говорили, что война закончилась, хотя она шла до 2006 года. Никто не показывал, не рассказывал, не говорил о потерях”.*

Consequently, the military campaign moved to the periphery of the public's attention.

In 2004, amidst the last military operations and ongoing repressions of civilians, I visited Chechnya and stayed in the city of Grozny with a local human rights activist, in a house that her family had rebuilt after the last bombing. My host told me numerous stories about everyday “clean-up” operations. Driving down dirt roads, along with ruins of destroyed houses, still-mined wastelands and numerous street stalls with glass jars holding petrol stolen from the local oil plant, we visited people who recently lost their relatives in military raids or kidnappings.

At the end of the day, the family of my host gathered in the kitchen. A TV set in the corner showed the evening news on Channel 1 of federal Russian TV. According to the news, a new ambulance station had opened in Grozny. In the TV footage, the ambulance was driving along a new road, coming from a brand-new hospital to the cosy little houses of peaceful citizens. A TV reporter stressed that the peaceful reconstruction of Chechnya was rapidly evolving, and federal financial aid was growing every month. I asked my host whether she had ever seen such a nice road anywhere in Grozny. They shrugged and told me not to watch state TV. Nobody in Chechnya did.

The state rhetoric about the purpose of the war changed gradually. Analyzing it, Emil Pain claims that in August 1999 the key theme was “the repulsion of the Chechen aggression in Dagestan”. This “repulsion”, of course, was allegedly supported by the whole of Russian society. In October came stories about the establishment of a cordon sanitaire – a security zone

which would separate Chechnya from Russia. In November 1999, the concept of the complete elimination of terrorists appeared. And only on the first of January Vladimir Putin declared that the main goal of the military campaign was to keep (preserve) Chechnya as part of Russia. It was exactly the same goal as set during the First Chechen war. The same war that, according to polls, 80% of Russian citizens previously had refused to support.<sup>46</sup>

After losing the first round of information warfare in 1994-1996, the militaries won the second round, crucially changing the public attitude towards their activities. The Second Chechen war was supported by the majority of the population and politicians from all parts of the political spectrum. According to a survey carried out by the independent research centre “Russian Public Opinion and Market Research” (ROMIR), if in 1995 only 20.4% of respondents agreed with the statement that “*the military operation in Chechnya is essential to prevent the disintegration of Russia*”, in 1999 already 53.1% of those interviewed agreed with it. Moreover, 62.5% (versus 3.2% in 1995) choose “*to pursue military action (until) all Chechen resistance is eradicated*” as the best solution to the Chechen problem.<sup>47</sup>

Consequently, the “just” (in public perception) second Chechen war caused a significant shift in army-society relations. It restored citizens’ trust towards the army. If, according to the Public Opinion Foundation poll, in February 1998 43% of informants doubted that the army was able to provide the security of the country, by May 2000 this amount had already decreased tenfold — to 4%, while 31% of informants were already confident that army could protect the country from external threats.<sup>48</sup> As Malashenko and Trenin show, the army began to be perceived as a defender of Russian citizens; peace, not supported by military force, began to be perceived as unreliable.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Pain, “Vtoraya chechenskaya voina i ee posledstviya”.

<sup>47</sup> From: E. Pain, “The Chechen War in the Context of Contemporary Russian Politics” *Chechnya. From Past to Future*. London: Anthem Press, 2005, p. 69.

<sup>48</sup> Malashenko, Trenin, *Vremya yuga*, p. 164.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 164. In recent decades, the relationship towards the army never was better. Ill-treatment in the Soviet army became a subject of public attention in 1988 when a victim of it murdered seven other soldiers. During Gorbachov’s Perestroika, the level of ill-treatment was extremely high, and the army was

The war was also used in order to launch an official patriotic campaign on a broad scale. In his memoirs, published in 2000, former president Boris Yeltsin for the first time called the Russian soldier fighting in Chechnya a national symbol of the country:

*“С каждым днем в глазах людей фигура российского военного, человека, защищающего страну и порядок на ее территории, все больше очищается от наносной грязи политической конъюнктуры. Становится объединяющим, мощным национальным символом. Страна уже не сможет забыть и предать этих ребят”.*<sup>50</sup>

The concept of the soldier as a unifying figure had rarely appeared in official speeches or media previously, but soon became an integral part of the state discourse used for political and military mobilization of the citizens. The war in Chechnya as an act of patriotism became one of the permanent topics in Vladimir Putin’s addresses to the Federal Assembly. In every speech, the president talked about the war as an action against *“распад государства”*,<sup>51</sup> *“восстановление территориальной целостности России”*;<sup>52</sup> *“готовность отразить потенциальную внешнюю агрессию и акты международного терроризма”*.<sup>53</sup>

The status of military personnel fighting in the Second Chechen war also changed. Unlike their predecessors, soldiers were provided with the legal status of veterans and relevant social benefits.<sup>54</sup> In addition, their service began being more generously remunerated. As Alexey Malashenko and Dmitriy Trenin argue, the Ministry of Defence tried to equate military salaries with the allowance of the Russian peacekeepers in the Balkans.<sup>55</sup> In addition, it boosted the

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perceived as a honorable prison. See: L. Polokhov. "Istoriya dedovshchiny: 'Delo Sakalauska'", *Vne zakona*, no. 4, 1997. <<http://polocxov.ru/?p=246>>

<sup>50</sup> B. El'tsin, *Prezidentskii marafon*.

<sup>51</sup> Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 3 April 2021. <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21216#sel=25:13:kae,25:26:cZk>>, accessed 11 March 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 16 May 2003. <<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21998>>, accessed 11 March 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 10 May 2006. <<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23577>>, accessed 11 March 2021.

<sup>54</sup> O vnesenii izmeneniya i dopolnenii v Federal'nyi zakon O veteranakh (s izmeneniyami na 22 avgusta 2004 goda). <<http://docs.cntd.ru/document/901833995>>, accessed 16 April 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Malashenko, Trenin, *Vremya Yuga*, p. 150.

number of contract soldiers dispatched to Chechnya so much so that the Ministry of Defence soon faced a budget crisis. From 2000, delays in the payment of front-line bonuses started, and dozens of Chechen veterans began repeatedly picketing and besieging the headquarters of the North Caucasus<sup>56</sup> and Volga<sup>57</sup> Military Districts.

Malashenko and Trenin compare the situation with mercenary army revolts in eighteenth-century Europe, when soldiers recruited from a pool of adventurers and the destitute were routinely not paid after the ends of wars, and then rioted.<sup>58</sup>

Besides official status and allowance, soldiers of the war could have expected to obtain a public endorsement. But they did not. Although the majority of Russian citizens supported the war and believed in solving the Chechen problem by force, through time, more and more people preferred to distance themselves from the war and to forget about the endless and disturbing situation. According to the survey conducted by the Levada Centre in 1999, a third of the population (33%) included the war in a list of major events that had happened in Russia during the year. However, in 2000, only 16%, or one-seventh of the respondents, regarded this war as important.<sup>59</sup>

According to Serguei Oushakine, for the majority of citizens, the war was symbolically relegated to a remote geographic province.<sup>60</sup> Russian media often used the phrase "the Russian army's invasion of Chechnya"<sup>61</sup> which implied that Chechnya was not part of Russia. My respondent, Chechen war veteran Alexei, also compared peaceful Moscow with Chechnya and its unseen deaths and suffering. Coming back home, he had been traumatized by the invisibility of soldiers dying in this war:

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<sup>56</sup> "V osade-2. Kontraktniki snova piketiruyut shtab Severo-Kavkazskogo voennogo okruga", *Vremya novostei*, 18 October 2000. <<http://www.vremya.ru/print/2445.html>>, accessed 12 March 2021.

<sup>57</sup> "Kontraktniki, sluzhivshie v Chechne, zablokirovali shtab Privolzhskogo voennogo okruga", *Lenta.ru*, 4 October 2000, <<https://lenta.ru/news/2000/10/04/samara>>, accessed 12 March 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Malashenko, Trenin, *Vremya Yuga*, p. 151.

<sup>59</sup> "2000 god: razocharovaniya i nadezhdy", Levada Centre, 25 December, 2000, <<https://www.levada.ru/2000/12/25/2000-god-razocharovaniya-i-nadezhdy>>, accessed 16 May 2020.

<sup>60</sup> S. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, p. 150.

<sup>61</sup> Stenogramma zasedaniya Gosudarstvennoi Dumy, 13 December, 1994, <<http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/node/3123>>, accessed 15 April 2020.

*“Люди здесь [в Москве] даже голову не забивают, кто там [в Чечне] гибнет. Там гибнут в основном деревенские пацаны. Здесь полная Москва каких-то утырков, которые уже чувство человеческого облика теряют, уроды натуральные, я их по другому назвать не могу, а там деревенские пацаны гибнут и всем до них натурально по барабану”.*

Unlike the participants of the first Chechen war, the soldiers of the second one did not receive a lot of public sympathy. There were few conscripts to arouse compassion; media rarely published images of soldiers' suffering or the war's horror, and veterans' fight for social benefits and front-line bonuses was not able to elicit much sympathy among the poor and disadvantaged Russian population.

Another important difference of the second war was the dehumanization of the enemy. Due to the numerous terrorist attacks<sup>62</sup> on Russian territory and the media discourse which emphasized the atrocities of the Chechens, a negative image of the enemy became more and more widespread. It started from top military commanders and penetrated all levels of society. For example, in 2001, General Gennady Troshev, the commander of the North Caucasian Military District, wrote in his memoirs that Chechens should not face anything except repression: *“Для бандитов, которые прячутся в ущельях и пещерах, которые за деньги посылают молодых людей устанавливать на дорогах фугасы, насиловать женщин, убивать стариков и детей, цивилизованное человечество не придумало иных мер, кроме репрессивных”*.<sup>63</sup>

*“Для них не существует ничего человеческого”*, — in his interview in September 2000, the Joint Force Commander in Chechnya, General Valeriy Baranov, made this comment

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<sup>62</sup> For the list of major Russian terror attacks in 1990-2000 see, for example, here: “Timeline of Russian terror attacks”, *The Guardian*, 24 January 2011. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/24/russian-terror-attacks-timeline>>, accessed 13 March 2021.

<sup>63</sup> G. Troshev. *Moya voina. Zapiski okopno gogenerala*. Moscow: Vagrius, 2001. <<http://www.lib.ru/MEMUARY/CHECHNYA/troshew.txt>>, accessed 13 March 2021.

about the Chechens.<sup>64</sup> Later, in 2006, in his article he blamed Chechens for the genocide of Russians and “вооруженное насилие, грабежи, разбой, похищение людей с целью выкупа, наркобизнес, контрабанда оружия и нефтепродуктов”.<sup>65</sup>

The policy of dehumanization had a visible impact. Sociologists discovered ethnic hostility directed against the Chechens specifically (rather than Muslims generally, or other ethnic groups resident in the Caucasus). According to numerous polls, this hostility appeared during the second Chechen war and persisted after the end of its active phase.<sup>66</sup>

Since the beginning of the 2000s, Russian culture has been imbued with anti-Chechen rhetoric. According to the literary critic Anna Brodsky, writing in 2004, anti-Chechen views were already widespread in Russian mass literature, popular films, television series, Internet sites, and in all strata of society.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, from the beginning of the 2000s, as one of the strategies of legitimization of the war, the state began to present the combat operation in Chechnya as a part of the global fight against international terrorism. If during the first war the state discourse linked Chechens with other separatist movements (for example, in Tatarstan), and blamed them for an attempt to “break up Russia”,<sup>68</sup> the second war was positioned within the world geopolitical situation. Military officials tried to displace the idea of the Chechen war as a civil conflict, calling Chechnya “международный бандитский анклав”<sup>69</sup> and claimed that the war was funded by “big foreign money”: “большие деньги, полученные от богатых иностранных покровителей и подрывных центров”.<sup>70</sup> According to Vladimir Putin,

<sup>64</sup> Malashenko, Trenin, *Vremya Yuga*, p. 134

<sup>65</sup> V. Baranov, “Ot voennykh deistvii- k vypolneniyu politseiskikh funktsii”, *Voенно-промышленный курьер*, 1 February 2006. <<https://vpk-news.ru/articles/4741>>, accessed 13 March 2021.

<sup>66</sup> See for example: “Casualty Sensitivity in a Post-Soviet Context: Russian Views of the Second Chechen War, 2001-2004”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 123, no. 1, 2008, pp. 39–68.

<sup>67</sup> A. Brodski, “Chechenskaya voina v zerkale sovremennoi rossiiskoi literatury”, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 6, 2004. <<https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2004/6/chechenskaya-vojna-v-zerkale-sovremennoj-rossijskoj-literatury.html>>, accessed 13 March 2021.

<sup>68</sup> This rhetoric, for example, was used by Boris Yeltsin when explaining the main reasons for the first Chechen war in his memoirs: “Мы не можем безучастно наблюдать, как отваливается кусок России, это станет началом распада страны”. (B. El'tsin. *Prezidentskii marafon*, p. 167.)

<sup>69</sup> G. Troshev. *Moя voina. Zapiski okopnogo generala*.

<sup>70</sup> V. Baranov, “Ot voennykh deistvii- k vypolneniyu politseiskikh funktsii”.

international terrorists were exploiting the conflict to their own ends: *“международные террористы подставили чеченский народ для достижения каких-то своих экстремистских целей.”*<sup>71</sup>

In an extreme (and almost caricature) form, this discourse (more precisely, about the death of soldiers of the Sixth Company, the myth of which will be discussed below) was presented in a book about the Second Chechen War, *“Шаг в бессмертие”* ("Step into Immortality"):

*“Компании США обнаружили в Каспийском регионе новые запасы нефти. Туда устремились хищники Запада, спровоцировавшие войну в Чечне, забросившие на российскую территорию десятки тысяч наемников из Афганистана, Пакистана, Иордании, арабских государств, прибалтийских республик, Украины с целью раздробить великую державу”.*<sup>72</sup>

As a result, the war in Chechnya was described as a part of a larger virtuous global fight. Analyzing the Soldiers' Mothers' movement, Serguei Oushakine distinguished between a “politics of pity” which commemorated fallen soldiers as victims and a “politics of blame” which accused the “enemy” of causing the death of Russian soldiers, facilitating a discourse of heroization.<sup>73</sup> As Oushakine indicates, the first war in Chechnya activated a “politics of pity,” the second a “politics of blame”. My own evidence confirms this argument.

Paradoxically, the “politics of blame” was not retrospectively applied to the first Chechen war which remained deeply unpopular and was considered unjust; its casualties were remembered as victims. Accordingly, in the new discursive universe where the primary purpose of military action was victory, veterans of the second campaign enjoyed more social recognition and glorification.

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<sup>71</sup> “Iz besedy s zhurnalistami po pribytii v Groznyi”, Kremlin.ru, 20 March 2000, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24187>>, accessed 19 May 2020.

<sup>72</sup> “Vykhodit v svetnovyi variant knigi ‘Shag v bessmertie’ o podvige 6-i roty”, *Pskovskaya lenta novostei*, 29 January 2019. <<https://pln-pskov.ru/society/334693.html>>, accessed 14 March 2021.

<sup>73</sup> S. Oushakine, “The Politics of Pity: Domesticating Loss in a Russian Province”, *American Anthropologist*, no. 108(2), 2006, p. 301.

## The Sixth Company Foundation Myth: Heroic Self-sacrifice for the Sake of the Community



**Figure 3.** The opening ceremony of the monument dedicated to the Sixth Company on the battlefield in Chechnya. The head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, is in the central right.<sup>74</sup>

The public discourse of the Second Chechen War differed in another significant way also: it shifted from victimization of Russian soldiers and veterans to their glorification. If the names of the soldiers of the first war became known only if they were captured or killed, soldiers of the second one often became known as heroes.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Photo initially published at "V Argunskom ushchel'e ustanovlen pamyatnik pskovskim desantnikam", *RusTeam Media*, 2 March 2017. <<https://rus.team/people/evtyukhin-mark-nikolaevich>>, accessed 24 May 2022.

<sup>75</sup> The glorification of the soldiers of the first Chechen war began much later than the end of it, in the 2000s, when, during the next Chechen campaign, the new state discourse demanded new heroes. The story was told of the Russian soldier Yevgeny Rodionov, who was killed in Chechnya in 1996 after he (according to an unconfirmed myth) refused to convert to Islam. In 2003, public figures and priests proposed to canonize Rodionov as a martyr. Although he was not canonized officially, Rodionov became a locally revered saint in several church parishes. More about it here: A. Kravetskii, "Svyatye bez razresheniya. Kogo kanoniziruyut v Rossii", *Kommersant*, 26 November 2017. <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3473753>>, accessed 15 March 2021.

At the beginning of the 2000s, a new official state discourse of the Chechen war begun to emerge. The central figures of it became the paratroopers of the Sixth Company of the 76th Airborne Division from the city of Pskov. In March 2000, 84 (among a group of 90) soldiers were killed by Chechen troops. According to the official version, they had a heroic night-time fight in the highland Shatoysky District of central Chechnya, next to the site designated by militaries as Height 776, with “a unit of militants who greatly outnumbered them”.<sup>76</sup>

Soon, 22 paratroopers were awarded the highest Russian honorary medal and the title of Hero of Russia (21 of them posthumously), while the other 68 soldiers (also posthumously) received the Order of Courage<sup>77</sup>. In comparison, only 86 medals of the Hero of the Soviet Union were awarded for the entire duration of the Afghan war.<sup>78</sup> Sociologist Natalia Danilova calls the death of the paratroopers the “foundation myth” of the fight against terrorism in Chechnya.<sup>79</sup> Ten days after the paratroopers’ death, Igor Sergeev, current Russian Minister of Defence, called them heroes: “*Пали в бою как герои, до конца оставаясь верными воинскому долгу, Присяге и боевому братству. (...) Наши доблестные десантники проявили героизм, мужество, стойкость, высокий профессионализм, удержали занимаемые позиции и не позволили террористам вырваться из окружения*”.<sup>80</sup>

Born immediately after the paratroopers’ defeat, the foundation myth of Sixth Company has been growing and evolving since then. It became the basis for several books, movies and even a musical.<sup>81</sup> In the last 20 years, 75 monuments dedicated to fallen soldiers emerged all

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<sup>76</sup> “The President Honoured the Memory of Paratroopers from the 6th Company”, Kremlin.ru, 1 March, 2020. <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62890>>, accessed 15 August 2020.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Spisok Geroev Sovetskogo Soyuza (Afganskaya voina): <<https://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/ruwiki/484705>>, accessed 2 August 2020.

<sup>79</sup> N. Danilova, “Victims and Heroes”, p. 66.

<sup>80</sup> “Soboleznovanie rodnym i blizkim pogibshikh v Chechne 85 pskovskikh voinov – desantnikov vyrazil ministr oborony RF marshal Sergeev”, *Pravda.ru*, 11 March 2000, <[https://www.pravda.ru/news/world/909814-soboleznovanie\\_rodnyim\\_i\\_blizkim\\_pogibshikh\\_v\\_chechne\\_85](https://www.pravda.ru/news/world/909814-soboleznovanie_rodnyim_i_blizkim_pogibshikh_v_chechne_85)>, accessed 19 May 2020.

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, TV-series “*Честь имею!*” (director Vitaly Buturlin, 2004) and *The Storm Gate* (“*Грозовые ворота*”, Andrey Maluykov, 2006), feature films *Breakthrough* (“*Прорыв*”, Vitaly Lukin, 2006), *Russian Victim* (“*Русская жертва*”, Elena Lyapicheva, Irina Meletina, Mikhail Dobrynin, 2008), documentary *Height* (“*Высота*”, Svetlana Konstantinova, Murad Kamalov, Russia 1 TV channel, 2020). Musical *The Spirit Warriors* (“*Воины духа*”, 2020). Fiction books: *Company. Make it to the Spring*.

over Russia.<sup>82</sup> The home cities of the dead paratroopers (including Chelyabinsk, Bryansk, Rybinsk, Tikhvin, Kirov, Kamyshin and many others) had streets renamed in their honour. Even the Chechen capital, the city of Grozny, acquired a Street of the 84 Pskov Paratroopers.<sup>83</sup>

Not only have commemorative events proliferated; the investigation of the deaths of the Sixth Company has also accelerated over time. The first defendants for this case went to jail 12 years after the battle, and the search for perpetrators continues (to date, 14 people have already been imprisoned; another 40 are under investigation).<sup>84</sup>

While the myths associated with the Sixth Company myth had been growing steadily over the years, the twentieth anniversary of the battle in February-March 2020 represented a major turning point. The commemoration ceremony was transformed into a huge military festival which showed the scale of changes in the perception of the war over last two decades.

Ironically, some of the memorial ceremonies were held on the battlefield in Chechnya which had been commemorated with a large cross-shaped monument a few years previously. Alongside military commanders and relatives of the fallen soldiers, the current Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, gave a solemn speech. Himself a former Chechen rebel who defected to the side of the federal Russian troops just six months before the Sixth Company

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(“Рота. Дожить до весны”, Andrey Konstantinov, Astrel Publishing, 2012), *The Last Parade, The Company* and *The Breakthrough* (“Последний парад”, “Рота”, “Прорыв”, Vyacheslav Dyogtev, published on the Internet), *The Step into Immortality* (“Шаг в бессмертие”, Oleg Dementyev and Vladimir Klevtsov. In 2005, the book was included in the state program *Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation for 2006-2010*. It went through eight editions, with a total print-run of 49,000 copies. See also: “Vykhodit v svetnovyi variant knigi ‘Shag v bessmertie’ o podvige 6-i roty”, *Pskovskaya lentanovostei*, 29 January 2019. <<https://pln-pskov.ru/society/334693.html>>, accessed 14 March 2021). The list of books and movies dedicated to the Sixth Company includes: “Proshchaite, muzhiki”: o proizvedeniyakh, posvyashchennykh podvigu 6 roty”, *Tsentr Delovoi Informatsii Pskovskoi Oblasti*, 1 March 2020. <<http://businesspskov.ru/news/166029.html>>, accessed 14 March 2021.

<sup>82</sup> V. Nordvik, A. Pavlov, “Poslednyaya rota Sovetskogo Soyuza. Moskovskii biznesmen postavil 75 pamyatnikov pogibshim geroyam 6-i roty, rozhdenym v ischeznuvshei strane”, *Rodina*, 1 October 2020. <<https://rg.ru/2020/10/13/moskovskij-biznesmen-postavil-75-pamiatnikov-pogibshim-geroiam-6-j-roty.html>>, accessed 14 March 2020.

<sup>83</sup> T. Borisov, “Ostalis' v Groznom. V chechenskoj stolitse pereimenovali ulitsu v chest' znamenitoi 6-i roty”, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 20 February 2008. <<https://rg.ru/2008/02/20/groznyi.html>>, accessed 15 March 2021.

<sup>84</sup> “Podvig 6-i roty: Putin pochtil pamyat' pskovskikh desantnikov — vse novosti”, *Regnum*. <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2871553.html>>, accessed 13 March 2021.

defeat, Kadyrov called the soldiers heroes who should never be forgotten, and blamed unknown “international terrorists” for fighting Russia from the territory of Chechnya:

*“Мы помним тяжелые времена, когда международные террористы из десятков стран мира выбрали Чеченскую Республику в качестве плацдарма для атаки на Россию, ими была поставлена задача ослабить и развалить Россию, нанести невосполнимый удар по экономике, подорвать политическую и экономическую стабильность. В этой борьбе погибли тысячи достойных защитников Отечества, среди них были бойцы героической шестой роты, которые стали примером доблестного служения Родине. Наш долг — никогда не забывать имена героев. Вечная слава бессмертной шестой роте, слава всем, кто погиб, защищая Россию”.*<sup>85</sup>

The same rhetoric of heroism and self-sacrifice was used by President Vladimir Putin, who participated in the memorial events in the city of Pskov, where the Sixth Company was based. During his numerous public speeches, he invoked the same themes of military duty, courage, battle brotherhood, love of the motherland, and allusions to other counter-terrorism campaigns, which he also used in his speeches about the war in Afghanistan:

*“Мы вспоминаем отважных десантников, отдаём честь их мужеству и подвигу. Они встали на пути сотен боевиков и приняли своё последнее сражение, свой последний бой, как настоящие герои, верные лучшим традициям боевого братства, которые свято хранят все поколения десантников”.*<sup>86</sup>

The official rhetoric of commemorative events was full of comparisons with the battles of the Great Patriotic War. In his speech, Vladimir Putin emphasized that fallen soldiers were «достойные наследники поколения, добывшего Великую Победу»,<sup>87</sup> despite the fact that, as

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<sup>85</sup> “V Chechne proshel miting, posvyashchennyi 20-letiyu podvigadesantnikov 6-i roty”, TASS, 28 February 2020. <<https://tass.ru/v-strane/7862417>>, accessed 13 March 2021.

<sup>86</sup> “Podvig 6-i roty: Putin pochtil pamyat' pskovskikh desantnikov — vseno vosti”, Regnum. <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2871553.html>>, accessed 13 March 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

he stressed, in 2000 there was no wave of patriotism such as occurred during the Great Patriotic War.<sup>88</sup>

In addition, after the commemoration event the president issued a decree on the establishment of a special programme of social security for the surviving paratroopers from the Sixth Company and the families of those of them who died.<sup>89</sup> Notably, the state offered ex-soldiers the form of recognition which they craved most, social benefits and welfare. (According to Serguei Oushakine, veterans endowed the notions of money and debt with strong moral connotations, so economic benefits were presented as a logical sign of respect.)<sup>90</sup>

Moscow also widely celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle, notably with the musical, *The Spirit Warriors* (“*Воины духа*”), “a large-scale and unforgettable show about the war between good and evil”,<sup>91</sup> in which a tank rolled out onto the stage, grenades exploded, and a chorus line in airborne uniform danced with Kalashnikovs, occasionally shooting into the ceiling. According to the reviews, the director of the show used “allusions on the military operation in Syria,”<sup>92</sup> associating it with the war in Chechnya.

The director was not the only one who made such allusions. In his Pskov speech, Vladimir Putin lined up a sequence of soldiers who fought for Russia in different time periods and extended the row of never-ending wars into the future:

*“Псковские десантники остались верны заветам отцов, дедов, прадедов, воевавших за Родину в самые разные периоды её истории. (...) Такая доблесть и самопожертвование ради Отечества всегда были, есть и будут в России истинными*

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 11 March 2020 No. 180 “O dopolnitel'nykh merakh sotsial'noi zashchity nekotorykh kategorii grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii”. <<http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202003110061?index=1&rangeSize=>>, accessed 13 March 2021.

<sup>90</sup> S. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, p. 164. More about this in the chapter 1 of this research.

<sup>91</sup> “V Moskve proshla prem'era obnovlennogo muzykal'nogo spektaklya ‘Voiny dukha’”, *ITV.ru*, 1 March 2020. <[https://www.1tv.ru/news/2020-03-01/381315-v\\_moskve\\_proshla\\_premiera\\_obnovlennogo\\_muzykalnogo\\_spektaklya\\_voiny\\_duha](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2020-03-01/381315-v_moskve_proshla_premiera_obnovlennogo_muzykalnogo_spektaklya_voiny_duha)>, accessed 17 March 2021.

<sup>92</sup> “Voiny dukha. Spektakl' o podvige desantnikov”, 1 March 2021. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZtIr2yBuc>>, accessed 18 March 2021.

ценностями, которыми дорожит наш народ”.<sup>93</sup> Thus, 20 years after, the battle (which itself began several hours after Defence Secretary Sergeyev announced that the Second Chechen War was over,<sup>94</sup> and ended with the defeat of the Russian forces) became the main symbol of the Second Chechen War and of military heroism as such.

During all the commemorative events, the image of the Sixth Company and the story of the soldiers' fight were completely detached from the real story of the Second Chechen war. None of the official speeches or publications explained why the soldiers clashed with the enemy in that particular place; what role, if any, the battle played in the military campaign; who the soldiers had fought with, and what were the causes of the war in general. Presumably, this was intended to hide the lack of clear ideology behind this war. Soldiers were decorated and glorified not for fighting against something but simply for dying in the place where the Motherland had sent them.

There is another, quite striking, side to the story of Sixth Company. Although the official narrative claimed that the paratroopers died in battle were greatly outnumbered by the enemy, journalists, soldiers and human rights activists who served or worked in Chechnya during the war offered other versions. According to independent journalists, “a small group of insurgents snuck up on an unprotected company and killed all of the soldiers”.<sup>95</sup>

Renat, a veteran of four military campaigns, including the Second Chechen war, elaborated this version in his interview. According to my respondent, his friend was among those who came to the place where the Sixth Company had been killed and found bodies of slain Russian soldiers lying alone. None of the hundreds of Chechens who, according to official information, had been killed by the Sixth Company, were actually there. Referring to his fellow officer who

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<sup>93</sup> A. Aleksandrov, L. Khairemdinov, “Vechnaya slava i vechnaya pamyat' bessmertnoi 6-i rote”, *Krasnaya zvezda*, 2 March 2020. <<http://redstar.ru/vechnaya-slava-i-vechnaya-pamyat-bessmertnoj-6-j-rote/>>, accessed 18 March 2021.

<sup>94</sup> P. Nikolaev, “V Chechne vzjali boevikov iz bandy Basaeva”, *Gazeta.ru*, 30 November 2020, <<https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2020/11/30/13380355.shtml>>, accessed 14 March 2021.

<sup>95</sup> “Fairy Tales of Glorious Battles in Chechnya”, *The Moscow Times*, 19 March 2008. <<http://oldtmt.vedomosti.ru/sitemap/free/2008/3/article/fairy-tales-of-glorious-battles-in-chechnya/361103.html>>, accessed 1 August 2020.

was captured by Chechen forces, fought alongside them during the battle with the Sixth Company and then managed to escape and tell this story, Renat assumes that the paratroopers were ambushed by 80 Chechens (not 200, as was written in official documents)<sup>96</sup> and shot before most of the soldiers were able to use their arms. Only five or six Chechens were killed, and the basis for the posthumous awards was the soldiers' service records rather than their achievements in this particular battle:

*“Получали героев России. Вот все погибли, только трое в живых остались. А как получали? Они же не видели, как они там воевали, как на высоте там их убивали, солдат. Открывают личное дело. Солдат отличник, шесть благодарностей в личном деле. Хоба – один выговор, ну ладно, надо героя. А вот прапорщик, 8 взысканий, выговоров. А этот прапорщик может там на высоте сражался героически. А ему дали орден, героя России не дали, потому что он по личному делу разгрядный. По личному делу давали героев России, по личному делу. Ни по качеству боя, по личному делу”.*

The third version of the Sixth Company deaths is one that I heard in an interview with Alexander Cherkasov, a chairman of the Russian Memorial Human Rights Centre, who worked in Chechnya, documenting human rights abuses and providing help to victims from the beginning of the first Chechen war.<sup>97</sup> According to Cherkasov, the paratroopers of the Sixth Company died from friendly fire. Russian troops shelled a hill that they passed and did not realise that the Six Company soldiers would be there. Most of the paratroopers were hit by Russian shellfire; others were picked off by Chechens.

A convincing explanation of why the cult of the paratroopers was created was given to me by Renat. According to him, paratroopers as the most elite branch of the military forces should always be above all accusations, and the heroic myth should have concealed the real defeat:

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<sup>96</sup> Prigovor po delu No. 2-11/2016. <<http://судебныерешения.рф/25780616/extended>>, accessed 18 March 2020.

<sup>97</sup> About Cherkasov's work see, for example: O.Orlov, A.Cherkasov, *Rossiya — Chechnya: tsep' oshibok i prestuplenii*. Moscow: Zven'ya, 1998.

*“Потому что это ВДВ, воздушно-десантных войска. Самые такие: огоо, ВДВ, тельняшка, там, берет голубой. Орешь: «Где ВДВ – там победа, там слава». И тут раз тебе – деградация такая. (...) А дальше и памятник, и заткнись, молчи, никаких судов, никого не добивать. 21 человек дали героя. (...) Чтобы только это умять, замять, что все была героическая 6 рота. И по ним стали фильмы снимать рассказы рассказывать”.*

Alexander Cherkasov also noted that the way the soldiers died did not influence the myth about them: *“Тем, кто придумывает мифы, им реальность особенно не важна. Это как миф про 28 панфиловцев. В нем никому не интересны панфиловцы”.*

The comparison with the myth about Panfilov’s 28 Guardsmen seems very valid here. This legendary unit of Soviet soldiers was written into the pantheon of national heroism after they died, supposedly battling German tanks, in the winter of 1941-1942.<sup>98</sup> Since the middle of the 2010s, the state (mostly through the Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky), created a cult of Panfilov’s 28. All across Russia, memorials were erected in their memory and streets named after them; a feature film was released in 2016. Yet the story of the dead heroes was questioned by historians. In 2015, the state archive published a scan of a declassified document from 1948 in which the chief Soviet military prosecutor informed Soviet politburo member Andrei Zhdanov that Panfilov’s story was based on a made-up story by a Red Army journalist, and that six of the posthumously decorated heroes had in fact survived the battle. One of them, Ivan Dobrobabin, was arrested for “betrayal of the motherland” in 1947. In response of publishing this archival information, Vladimir Medinsky publicly said that anyone who interferes with the

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<sup>98</sup> The myth about 28 Guardsmen was questioned as early as 1966 by a Soviet journalist Emil’ Kardin (E.V. Kardin, “Legendy i fakty”, *Novyi mir*, no. 2, 1966, p. 237.). His publication provoked a public discussion and personal criticism of Leonid Brezhnev (A. Statiev, “La Garde meurt mais ne se rend pas! Once Again on the 28 Panfilov Heroes”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 13, no.4, 2012, pp. 769-798.) More about the history of the myth: T. Balmforth, ‘Soviet WWII Legend Of Panfilov Guardsmen Debunked As ‘Fiction’’, *Radio Liberty*, 12 July 2015, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/soviet-wwii-panfilov-guardsmen-fiction/27123430.html>>, accessed 8 April 2022.

“sacred legend” of Panfilov’s 28 men is “filthy scum.”<sup>99</sup> Sergei Mironenko, head of the Russian State Archive, lost his position, though he remained in another post with the Russian archive administration.

In contrast with the Panfilov’s 28 myth, no one publicly tried to denounce the Sixth Company story, but it is easy to anticipate that such attempt would have also provoked a conflict. The story of heroic paratroopers had the same function for the Chechen war as Panfilov’s 28 for the contemporary image of the Great Patriotic War. These narratives lie in the very basis of the state ideology. As Medinskiy claimed in his interviews, Russia is the country of heroes with a certain type of resilience (“тип стойкости”). The sacrifices of these heroes “hold the national identity” and “civil and historical unity of the country”.<sup>100</sup> Accordingly, these myths should be considered as parts of nation-building, not history. To quote Medinsky himself, disputes about them are disputes “not academic but ideological.”<sup>101</sup> As a resurgence of Great Patriotic War mythology (not just Panfilov’s 28, but partisan heroine Zoya Kosmodemianskaya), the Sixth Company legend had exactly such an ideological function.<sup>102</sup> It was a traditional story about Russian resilience and heroic self-sacrifice for the sake of the wider community. In this regard, the discourse of the Second Chechen War corresponds with the state discourse of the Great Patriotic War. In 20 years, instead of victimized “baby-conscripts” of the First Chechen wars, their successors became portrayed as heroes who, if necessary, were able

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<sup>99</sup> D. Filipov, “Russia’s Culture Minister Says Anyone Who Questions This Tale of Soviet Bravery Is ‘Filthy Scum’”, *The Washington Post*, 28 November 2016.

<<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/28/one-surefire-way-to-be-called-scum-in-russia-expose-a-heroic-world-war-ii-story-as-a-myth/>>, accessed 8 April 2022.

<sup>100</sup> “Chto Vladimir Medinskii govoril o podvige 28 panfilovtsev: tsitaty raznykh let”, *RTVI*, 3 December 2018. <<https://rtvi.com/stories/chto-vladimir-medinskiy-govoril-o-podvige-panfilovtsev/>>, accessed 8 May 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> About the creation and development of these myths see, for example: V. Davis. *Myth Making in the Soviet Union and Modern Russia: Remembering World War II in Brezhnev’s Hero City*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2018; J.B. Platt. “Zoya Kosmodemianskaya. Between Sacrifice And Extermination”, *New Formations*, no. 89-90, 2016, pp. 48-70.

to mobilize around the government or military leadership, shared the values of battle brotherhood and were ready to come to the rescue of their comrades.<sup>103</sup>

According to sociologist Lev Gudkov, it was the Great Patriotic War that created models for rituals of group and national solidarity for Russian society. In them, the state used inflated, exalted situations of heroic feats and self-sacrifice, which allowed “fulfilling the requirements of the party and government as an internal need of citizens’. Employing myths in this way denied the intrinsic value of private existence.<sup>104</sup> From my evidence, one can say the same about the Sixth Company.

As Serguei Oushakine assumes, the link between the Great Patriotic War and the Chechen war that seemed so strikingly out of place in the mid-1990s became the rhetorical norm ten years later. Images of suffering soldiers of the Second World War were unproblematically conflated with descriptions of veterans’ experiences in the Chechen war. Such activation of war trauma generated instant sympathy. This link between the two wars did not relate to the type or purpose of the conflicts themselves (after all, World War II was a defensive rather than invasive confrontation). Rather, patriotic values were evoked as a particular state of emotions, as a repetition of a familiar configuration of painful events.<sup>105</sup>

Besides, as in the Great Patriotic War, the non-heroic, non-victorious side of the war (soldiers’ deaths and abductions; extrajudicial killings of Chechens and “clean-up” operations in villages; the fear of terrorist attacks far away from the frontline), has left the public sphere and gone into a kind of subconscious of society.

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<sup>103</sup> A large part of the Sixth Company mythologizing is devoted to Major Alexander Dostavalov who, together with 15 soldiers, arbitrarily, against the order of the commandment, joined his comrades in the Sixth Company and died together with them. About this: E. Vasil'kova, “Prosti, 6-ya rota. Kak zhili i pogibali pskovskie desantniki”, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, no. 41, 29 February 2020. <<https://rg.ru/2020/02/26/kak-zhili-i-pogibali-pskovskie-desantniki.html>>, accessed 12 March 2021.

<sup>104</sup> L. Gudkov, “Pamyat o voine i massovaya identichnost' rossiyan”, *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, no.40, 2005. <<https://polit.ru/article/2005/05/08/pamjat/>>, accessed 12 March 2021.

<sup>105</sup> S. Oushakine, “Exchange of Sacrifices: Symbolizing an Unpopular War in Post-Soviet Russia”, *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War across the Disciplines*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, p. 193.

Over time, even the image of the enemy was reduced to a symbolic international terrorist in a black mask, deprived of his face, name, and nationality. In the musical *The Spirit Warriors*, the main paratroopers' foe calls himself the Dementor, borrowing the title from J. K. Rowling's book but not the realities of the year 2000. All the complexity of the real Chechen war disappears; it is replaced by the image of a fairy tale with a simple separation of good and evil, friends and foes. In the musical, good triumphs over evil. The audience gave the performance a standing ovation.<sup>106</sup>



**Figure 4.** The final scene from the musical *The Spirit Warriors*.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>106</sup> A video from the show can be seen here: “Voiny dukha. Spektakl' o podvige desantnikov”, 1 March 2021. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZtIIr2yBuc>>, accessed 18 April 2021.

<sup>107</sup> The photograph was published in a Live Journal webpage <<http://dervishv.livejournal.com/894598.html>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

## Post-Conflict Itineraries of Chechen Veterans:

### Social Hopelessness, Public Stigmatization and Permanent War

Paradoxically, the societal support of soldiers in Chechnya did not lead to any change in attitude towards those who fought in Afghanistan. In public discourse, the last Soviet war remained unjust.

Nevertheless, the different attitudes towards different groups of veterans did not put a strain on their relations. In the middle of the 1990s, Chechen veterans followed the path laid out by their predecessors. Using the Afghan model, as the war was still going on, they quickly started organizing grassroots unions and organizations for invalids as a basis for their self-help and communications with the state. Many Chechen alliances either arose on the basis of the Afghan ones, or reproduced their structure and goals. Serguei Oushakine draws attention to the fact that veterans soon began to call themselves *chechentsy* (from “Chechnya”) using the same toponymic approach as the *afgantsy*.<sup>108</sup>

Paradoxically, the relatively disenfranchised *afgantsy* become for the *chechentsy* a sort of older and more privileged comrade. Previously, Great Patriotic War veterans had played the same role for *afgantsy* themselves, being for them a sort of *dedy*.<sup>109</sup> In an interview published in the official newspaper of the Russian Ministry of Defence, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, in 2001, one of the heads of the Battle Brotherhood organization pointed out that “*Опыт наших товарищей, воевавших в Афганистане, здорово пригодился. Молодые ветераны Чечни учились всему*

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<sup>108</sup> S. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, p. 171.

<sup>109</sup> “Grandfathers” (“godfathers”), a slang word for senior conscripts serving their last year of compulsory military service and violent towards more junior ones. From this word, the notion ‘*dedovshina*’ [institutionalized bullying or hazing] was derived.

*у своих старших товарищей. (...) Вопрос о нашем сближении с «афганцами» был практически сразу же предрешен”.*<sup>110</sup>

Over time, afgantsy acquired a patronizing attitude towards Chechens as younger brothers, and vice versa. To quote my respondent Ahmed, “*чеченские ветераны ещё себя не показали, ещё не говорят. (...) Время придёт, мы [афганцы] уйдём и через нас будут чеченцы*”.

Moreover, the analysis of the Chechen veterans’ interviews shows that they identify themselves as the younger generation which owes all the best they possess to the older one:

*“У нас афганцы были на контракте, очень много было афганцев, с ними, конечно, гораздо проще служить было. Знали они гораздо больше. [...] Мое ощущение, что вот гораздо более молодое поколение, которое стало по контракту приходить уже в Чечню, они уже не поедут никуда воевать. Может, я заблуждаюсь, но сейчас таких людей нету. Вот среди моего поколения, людей, которые выросли на ВДВ, которые мечтали в ВДВ служить еще в советское время, вот еще замес советский. Вот на нем все и держится. [...] Вот у меня ощущение, что, как закончилась Чечня, никто дальше уже не придет из людей с таким опытом огромным как афганцы и чеченцы с первой второй компании. Дослужат, добьют их где-то в Сирии и никто им на смену не придет. Фанатов, чтобы ехать куда-то и делать свою жизнь, превращать в профессию под названием ‘война’ никто уже не станет”.*

As I would argue, the crucial difference between the two generations of veterans lay in the circumstances of their postwar socialization. Afghan veterans were not just 10-15 years older. Most of them came home in the very middle of the transition from the Soviet Union to new Russia. They had little chance to receive a proper education or choose a profession and had to rely on social benefits provided by the state or military unions. Besides, to judge from my interviews, they had thoroughly interiorized Soviet discourse, in which the state was the main actor that ensured

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<sup>110</sup> A. Mikhailov, “Budushchee nachinaetsya segodnya”, *Krasnaya zvezda*, 15 February 2001, <[http://old.redstar.ru/2001/02/15\\_02/hist25.html](http://old.redstar.ru/2001/02/15_02/hist25.html)>, accessed 12 July 2020.

protection and bestowed wellbeing on its citizens. By contrast, veterans of Chechnya grew up in a country that had already undergone significant transformation, above all in the level of state support provided. Besides, they had not been so exposed to the narratives about heroic soldiery before they joined up. They were more individualistic and relied on themselves to a greater extent than the previous generation. They also had fewer illusions and were less prone to rely on state institutions. For example, my respondent, Chechen veteran Alexei told me that he never expected to receive any welfare:

*“Мне говорят: да ты знаешь, что можно земельный участок пробить [получить бесплатно от местных властей]. Я говорю: иди пробивай, тебе интересно — иди пробивай. [...] Захотят — сами дадут, не захотят, сам я не пойду. Мне кроме рук ног ничего не нужно, они есть — я сам себе на жизнь заработаю”.*

At the same time, Chechen veterans, just like afgantsy, also had little chance to improve their qualifications, and had to take any heavy physical jobs that were going. A striking and desperate picture of the post-war socialization of chechentsy is painted by Arkady Babchenko, a conscript during the first Chechen campaign, contract soldier during the second, and a writer and journalist afterwards. According to him, hit by the defeat of the wars – both military and moral – Chechen veterans failed in their civilian lives as well. If troops in Afghanistan consisted of conscripts from all levels of Soviet society (including university graduates), who later were able to use army service as a social lift, during the Chechen wars, when draft-evasion became commercialized, and a bribe could help a draftee to escape conscription, serving in the army represented a kind of indentured labour, where the poorest strata of society supported the richest: *“Личный номер стал клеймом низшей касты, которую отправляют на войну”*.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> A. Babchenko, “Voyna uchastvuet vo mne”, *Novaya Gazeta*, no.22, 29 March 2007. <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2007/03/29/34197-voyna-uchastvuet-vo-mne>>, accessed 17 March 2021.

Babchenko argues that most conscripts came from unprivileged families based in remote Russian regions, often from rural areas. While leaving for the army from nowhere, they returned to even greater social hopelessness:

*“Сегодняшняя власть создала ту армию, о которой мечтали коммунисты, — рабоче-крестьянскую. И служат в ней рабоче-крестьяне. [...] Среди всех моих знакомых только человек пять стали средним классом. В интернете ветеранское сообщество чеченцев также почти не представлено. Знаете почему? У них попросту нет компьютеров. Проигранная гражданская война на своей территории со своими гражданами и неясными целями, помноженная на катастрофическое классовое расслоение, загнала парней в заранее обозначенные рамки и выбора им попросту не оставляет”.*

Nevertheless, despite their underprivileged status and lack of access to facilities such as IT, the Babchenko’s veterans’ post-war itineraries look in other ways strikingly similar to the afghantsy ones. Among them, too, alcoholism is common: *“Либо бухать в охране, либо бухать на стройке. Из тех, кто был со мной во вторую чеченскую, спилось не меньше половины. Многие сели. Остальные перебиваются по охранам”.*<sup>112</sup>

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The impact of the Chechen wars was much deeper than its immediate results, and could not have been more different from the official patriotic myth. According to political scientist Pavel Baev, the self-perception, as well as the reputation of the army, was indelibly marked by the degradation arising from the brutal and never-ending war.<sup>113</sup>

The official number of soldiers who passed through Chechnya has never been published. Some estimates were made by Russian and Western military journalists and experts. The latter offer a semi-official figure of 91,500 soldiers in 1994-1995 and 80,000 in 1999 —2000.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Baev, “Chechnya and the Russian Military”, p. 126.

<sup>114</sup> G. F. Krivosheev, *Rossiia i SSSR v voynakh XX veka: Poteri Vooruzhennykh Sil*, Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 2001, p. 582.

According to journalists, at the peak, the Russian forces in Chechnya were 100,000 strong, which would mean that in the course of 12 years, between 800,000 and a million men had been in the territory.<sup>115</sup> For comparison, in total, during the Afghan war, around 620,000 soldiers participated.<sup>116</sup>

Besides soldiers, there were policemen and Interior Ministry troops (“ОМОН”) continuously sent to Chechnya for a term from one to six months. Although this practice lasted for more than a decade, and involved a huge number of servicemen, I have found only one study of policemen’s post-war adaptation and the ways through which their service in hot-spots influenced their later work and law enforcement agencies in general: this was conducted by the independent Moscow Demos Research Centre.<sup>117</sup> According to the study, during the 2000s, such military assignments became routine for most policemen. Officially, they went to Chechnya voluntarily. In practice, policemen were rarely able to refuse.<sup>118</sup> My respondent Sergey, a former riot police officer, acknowledged that trips were enforced by the directives and pressure of fellow policemen. Strikingly, the respondent proudly stressed that those policemen who refused to go to the battlefield became total outsiders:

*“Выбора-то особо и нет: либо уходить из органов, что, собственно, наш горячо любимый замполит Егоров и сделал, сейчас где-то же здесь живёт, в этом подъезде. Была возможность в командировку, а он сказал: я не поеду. И всё, галочка напротив фамилии Егоров – и всё. Ходим здороваемся, но не более. Не интересен мне человек”.*

<sup>115</sup> Babchenko, “Voyna uchastvuet vo mne”.

<sup>116</sup> The only official data can be found here: “Ofitsial'nye dannye o sovetskikh poteryakh v Afganistane”. *Grif sekretnosti snyat. Poteri vooruzhennykh sil SSSR v voynakh, boevykh deistviyakh i voennykh konfliktakh*. Moscow: Voenizdat, 1993. <<https://web.archive.org/web/20010519210510/http://www.hro.org/editions/karta/nr24-25/victim.htm>>, accessed 15 March 2021. At the same time, the official casualty figures for the first war were listed as 5,500 federal police and soldiers during the first war and a further 5,200 during the second. More here: M. Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, “Essential Histories”, 2014.

<sup>117</sup> *Militsiya mezhdru Rossiei i Chechnei. Veterany konflikta v rossiiskom obshchestve*, Moscow: Demos, 2007. The research uses interviews with policemen and their families conducted in five Russian regions.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

After being demobbed, veterans of the Chechen war faced the same problems as the afgantsy. They came back to a society that was reluctant to deal with the participants of an unpopular war, and they suffered from psychological traumas and an uncertain future. According to Tanya Lokshina, a co-author of the program “Veterans of Chechnya” in the Demos Research Centre, “nobody wants to hire them [chechentsy]; nobody needs them or wants to deal with them”.<sup>119</sup>

My respondent Vitaliy, citizen of the city of Bryansk, who spent a year of his conscription in the trenches of the Second Chechen war, started his interview with a traumatic story of his hopeless attempts to be employed in the police:

*“Я хотел устроиться в милицию. Что... препятствия были ужасные. Скажем так, я делал медицинскую справку [для поступления на работу в милицию] три месяца. Я учился в Злынке [город в Брянской области]. Меня сначала отправляли за одной справкой туда, я ее привозил, потом отправляли за другой справкой опять туда же. Брать просто не хотели. Была такая устная, скажем так, установка, в поликлинике МВД же медкомиссию проходили, чтобы всех ветеранов боевых действий... [небрать]. Якобы проблемы с психикой”.*

These huge numbers of men, many of whom had perpetrated acts of extreme violence and repeated abuses of human rights up to the level of war crimes, came back home to find themselves officially honoured but publicly stigmatized.<sup>120</sup> Since 2000, the term “Chechen syndrome” (recalling the Vietnam one) became widely used in the Russian media to describe a transposition of the violence of the Chechen conflict, and repressive methods in particular, to other regions of Russia and other categories of the population.<sup>121</sup> The stigma of “those who passed through Chechnya” limited the upward mobility of veterans and their reintegration into

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<sup>119</sup> “Interview with Tanya Lokshina, President of the Demos Centre Conducted by Olga Filippova, Moscow, 11 May 2007”, *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, no. 6/7, 2007. <<http://journals.openedition.org/pipss/772>>, accessed 17 April 2020.

<sup>120</sup> It is important to clarify that the myth about the Six Company was created much later and became widespread already in the end of the 2010s.

<sup>121</sup> Le Huerou, Sieca-Kozlowski, “A ‘Chechen Syndrome’?”, p. 27.

civilian life. According to the Demos Centre report, potential employees, fearing that ex-servicemen were mentally fragile, refused to hire them. Desperate, veterans took jobs in police and began to travel to hot-spots again.<sup>122</sup> Often, they went deeper into social isolation or gathered together into enclosed communities.

Private security companies and building sites, mentioned by Babchenko, became one of the main veterans' employers. As an example, after his unsuccessful attempt to become a policeman, Vitaliy, my respondent from Bryansk, found a job in construction, which he was satisfied with:

*“Самое оптимальное, где не надо ничего [из медицинских документов]. [...] Взял автомобиль, какой никакой. Ну как: отрывался, радовался жизни, короче. Какая-никакая работа, какая-никакая зарплата была”.* Due to a lack of other employment, and, no less importantly, to attempt to find meaning in their lives, many ex-servicemen became professional mercenaries. According to my respondents, the first professional soldiers of fortune had come from the ranks of the afgantsy.<sup>123</sup> After the first Chechen war, their number grew rapidly. Just as with the afgantsy, most of the chechentsy found it easier to preserve their military identity and already had a habit of routinely using violence.

From the 1990-2000s, Chechen war veterans could be met with in the French Foreign legion, and in private paramilitary companies from Canada to South Africa. Former Russian and Soviet fighters were involved in de-mining areas of armed conflict under UN programs, worked on the construction of permanent military bases for NATO troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, and guarded convoys with cargo and foodstuffs.<sup>124</sup>

According to my respondent Alexei, a former riot policeman (“омоновец”), then contract soldier during the second Chechen war, and now a parachute test pilot in the Moscow Scientific

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<sup>122</sup> *Militsiya mezhdu Rossiei i Chechnei*, p. 167.

<sup>123</sup> *“Вот у нас [в ОМОНе] Леха Чупин постоянно [воевал на разных войнах]. Как только начал с Афгана, так до сих пор. Человек – война. Другого ничего не умеет”.* (Interview with Sergey, Moscow); *“Вот в Чечне там 30-40 % афганцев было”* (Interview with Alexei, Moscow)

<sup>124</sup> More information: I. Ivanov, A. Vиграizer, “Soldaty Razrukhi”, *Snob*. <<https://snob.ru/society/armii-po-vyzovu-glava-4>>, accessed 15 April 2021.

Research Institute of Parachute Construction, there are two main types of employment for former combatants. First and the less prestigious and poorly paid one is a work in private security companies as security guards or watchmen. The second, more preferable and well-paid one is a military or paramilitary service in different state or private armies like *ЧВК Вагнер* (The Wagner Group): “У всех чопно<sup>125</sup>-переходный период, все в охране работали, когда нигде работать, все прутся в охрану. [...] Те, кого я знаю, они стремились заключить контракт с воюющим подразделением и попасть куда-то в организацию типа вот этого ЧВК Вагнера. Где-то начинается замес [война], они оттуда увольняются и едут”.

The Wagner Group is a Russian paramilitary organization whose contractors have allegedly taken part in the war in Ukrainian Donbass in 2014 on the side of the separatists of self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, in the Syrian Civil War, fighting together with the Syrian government forces, and in many African countries. The Group derived its name from its alleged founder Dmitry Utkin, a veteran of both Chechen wars.<sup>126</sup> According to Roman, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, many of his fellow soldiers have already died while serving in such paramilitary companies:

*“У меня уже взводный погиб в Сирии, и командир второго взвода в Сирии. (...) А они ж как, прошедший Афганистан, потом в разведбате со мной были. Их, видать, отбирали как специалистов. И вот они в первые дни [в Сирии погибли], колбасня была”.*

According to Alexei, Chechen veterans try to serve in the Russian army as long as they can. Afterwards, when they are already old for the military service, they have to switch to private paramilitary companies or, if they are unable to pass a physical examination that paramilitary companies require, come back to security services:

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<sup>125</sup> “ЧОП” is an abbreviation from “частное охранное предприятие”, a private security enterprise.

<sup>126</sup> “Putin Chief's Kisses of Death: ‘Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed’”, *The Bellingcat Investigation Team*, 14 August 2020. <<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/>>, accessed 17 April 2022.

*“Многие подались, из-за того, что у них возраст, то есть, уже по контракту служить невозможно, в вагнеры<sup>127</sup> пошли и всю Сирию вагнерами прослужили. [...] Такие деньги платятся с обеих сторон: и боевикам ИГИЛ, и нашим бойцам ЧВК Вагнер. Но сейчас уже там деньги такие не платят, там, как только боевые действия пошли на спад, там только нефтяные месторождения охраняют. [...] В ЧВК, куда они еще могут пойти – в охрану? [...] Даже в этом ЧВК Вагнера – если не сдаешь физико на уровне 30-летних, то тебя не берут”.*

The main factor why Alexei separated service in the security companies and paramilitary organizations was the way these jobs were paid. Otherwise, he did not distinguish service in the Russian army from service in a private paramilitary company like the Wagner Group. As in the Chechen war itself, the nature of the enemy or the goals of the war or whether victory was achievable or not did not play a big role for him. The main thing he stressed in his interview was the meaningfulness of a military career, a sense of belonging to great events and the feeling of being valuable which it gives:

*“У меня знакомый с Рязани, со 137 полка, зарабатывал он 200 тысяч приблизительно в месяц, был, что ли, руководителем ЧОПа, но уходил с зарплатой в 200 тысяч в ЧВК Вагнера, когда там получали приблизительно 120 тысяч, и он всё равно пошел. То есть, не ради денег. Я совершенно точно могу сказать, что кто едет постоянно – это не ради денег. [...] Деньги – сюда приехал, спустил в никуда, как из пушки по воробьям, а вот это ощущение, что ты был причастен к таким событиям, оно остается на всю жизнь. [...] Есть такой костяк людей, которые этим живут. Я по себе знаю, что вот сюда первый раз я вернулся из Чечни...я просто понимаю, что я тут находиться не могу, не жить, не в семье, мне постоянно хочется обратно. [...] Там [на войне] все по-настоящему, там делят последний кусок хлеба черного никто ни за кем ничего, консервы не считает, деньги не считает, там люди открыты, как бы видно, кто из себя что*

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<sup>127</sup> See: “Putin Chief’s Kisses of Death”.

*представляет. Чмошников на войне нету, люди которые шкуры, туда б поехал за деньги... там нет таких. Во время боевых действий чувствуешь себя мужчиной, что ты выполняешь по-настоящему мужскую работу, чувствуешь свою нужность, необходимость, что ты по-настоящему на своем месте. А здесь какая бы работа ни была, чувствуешь себя... я не знаю... что ты занимаешься какой-то ерундой...”*

Arkady Babchenko also went to the second Chechen war voluntarily, and later in an interview explained it as a return to the place which was more familiar him then the world of civilians: *“Я не возвращался на войну как таковую. Я просто уходил из этого мира, который меня не принял, и который я не принял. Я не мог здесь жить, и я поехал туда, где мне все было понятно. Я возвращался, наверное, к себе, оставшемуся там”*.<sup>128</sup>

### **The Chechen Syndrome: Spread of Violence in Postwar Society**

Researchers agree that the experience of “having been through Chechnya” significantly changed soldiers, and both fostered and legitimized acts of violence.<sup>129</sup> According to the Demos Centre report, upon their return, policemen “stop looking for a variety of communication, feeling comfortable only among those who have similar experiences of a hotspot. [...] It becomes difficult for them to maintain social connections in a wider context. Policemen move away from citizens, oppose themselves to society, and find themselves in social isolation.”<sup>130</sup> My interviews confirm that this applies to army veterans also. The military experience transformed their values structure, formed psychological resistance to violence, created the experience of legal nihilism<sup>131</sup> and "defensive" attitudes towards civilians.<sup>132</sup> In the case of policemen, the feeling of suspicion they had been taught to harbour towards the Chechen

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<sup>128</sup> “A. Babchenko: ‘Oruzhie ne voz'mu bol'she nikogda’”, *BBC Russian*, 7 April 2008. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/entertainment/newsid\\_7326000/7326574.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/entertainment/newsid_7326000/7326574.stm)>, accessed 25 March 2021.

<sup>129</sup> Le Huerou, Sieca-Kozlowski, “A ‘Chechen Syndrome’?”, p. 26.

<sup>130</sup> *Militsiya mezhdru Rossiei i Chechnei*, p. 30-31.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29

civilian population was transposed onto the people of their own region, distorting their relationship with the population.<sup>133</sup>

According to Anne Le Huerou and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozlowski, Russian official discourse authorized and even encouraged recourse to violence against the whole of the Chechen population, designated as potential terrorists. This greatly contributed to forging the “image of the enemy,” both in the military on the frontline and in the whole of Russian society as well.<sup>134</sup> Inevitably, this military violence was brought back from Chechnya to Russia. One of the most anticipated of the legacies of the Chechen war became the forging of the “image of the enemy” and the hatred towards the Chechens, or, often, to all North Caucasus nations, or all Russian Muslims among soldiers and in Russian society in general.

In contrast with afgangtsy, most of whom (according to my interviews) did not hold hard feelings against their former foe; my respondents who fought in Chechnya were still full of rage and anger towards their enemies. As soldiers of civil wars generally do, they saw their opponents as valiant enemies beaten in fair fight, but as traitors from within. In their interview, they built a narrative of people from North Caucasus who have always been hostile towards Russians and now, after the end of two wars, are gaining power and influence again:

*“Для меня чеченцы никогда своими не были, мусульмане – враги. [...] Кавказ – для меня не родина, они для меня не единое целое [с Россией]. Если про Советский Союз те же афганцы могли сказать, что мы были единое целое, то могу точно сказать, что про чеченцев и ингушей такого не скажешь, они для нас всегда были чужие. [...] Им столько власти дали, что они могут с оружием по Москве ходить, до сих пор”.*

Hatred towards Chechens was not limited to words. In the 2000s, many criminal cases, recorded by lawyers and NGOs, emphasized acts of violence committed in police stations against Chechens living in Russia outside of Chechnya. In 2005, Svetlana Gannushkina, the

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<sup>133</sup> E. Sieca-Kozlowski, “Demos Centre, ‘Militsiia mezhdru Rossiei i Chechnei.’ Veterany konflikta v rossiiskom obshchestve”, *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, no. 9, 2009. <<http://journals.openedition.org/pipss/1960>>, accessed 1 March 2021.

<sup>134</sup> Le Huerou, Sieca-Kozlowski, “A ‘Chechen Syndrome’?”, p. 30.

Chair of Russia's Civic Assistance Committee, describing cases of police violence against Chechens in Moscow,<sup>135</sup> argued that violence towards Chechens is a consequence of the wars, and all such cases are parts of a campaign against them.<sup>136</sup> In some cases, the policemen themselves explained this violence by the hatred for all Chechens aroused during the war.<sup>137</sup>

I hypothesize that anti-Chechen sentiment was not limited to actual ethnic Chechens. There is no statistic for hate crimes in Russia and it is impossible to find out the numbers of crimes against different ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, I assume negative ethnic stereotypes were extended not only to all Chechens but also to other ethnicities from the North Caucasus. Two of the informants of the Demos Centre, riot policemen, claimed that due to their work in Chechnya they obtained intolerance towards all ethnical minorities living in Russia and now consider themselves racist.<sup>138</sup>

One of my informants, Vyacheslav, an Afghan war veteran and, notably, a Bryansk Regional Duma deputy, routinely used the word “чурка” (a derogatory term used for Russian ethnical minorities and people from Central Asia) in his interview. When I asked whom he was referring to, he hesitated and was not able to give a list of particular ethnicities except Chechens (although it was clear that he had a particular image of “чурка” in his head).<sup>139</sup> In his interview, he also told a story of an ex-combatant called Valeriy who killed a member of an ethnic minority group and was sentenced to 11 years in jail. According to Vyacheslav, the victim, a market

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<sup>135</sup> “Рассказала нам это Садаева Кумира Шансудиновна, которая рассказывает этот так, что она вечером пришла с рынка домой и увидела, что всех чеченцев выставили из дома на улицу. Идет проверка документов. Все это шло с унижениями, с оскорблениями, касалось только людей одной национальности. Ее дочь с маленькими детьми тоже выставили на улицу, не дали ей остаться с младенцами, которые уж никак не террористы”. From: “Presledovanie chechentsev v Rossii”, *Radio Svoboda*, 15 April 200 5. <<https://archive.svoboda.org/11/hr/0405/11.041505-1.asp>>, accessed 28 March 2021.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Le Huerou, Sieca-Kozlowski, “A ‘Chechen Syndrome’?”, p. 28.

<sup>138</sup> The quotation from an interview with one of the policemen: “И бывает момент – это отношение к нерусским. Оно и так было какое-то не совсем, а после командировки я укрепился в своем негативном к ним отношении. Вообще, ко всем нерусским. Расистом становлюсь”. From *Militsiya mezhdu Rossiei i Chechnei*. p. 151.

<sup>139</sup> From the interview with Vyacheslav: “Таджики они на кухнях на всех на этих, про казахов не могу сказать, казахи с нами ребята [на военные операции в Афганистане] ходили, не боялись ничего. Чеченцы никогда в жизни не воевали. Они прятались, они на кухне жрали, они как были сапогами...”

seller, took Valeriy for an alcoholic, asked him to unload a car and offered a glass of spirit for this job. Valeriy felt offended by this offer and, due to his military experience, killed the seller with one blow. My informant completely justified the murderer and lamented that police had started supporting ethnical minorities recently: *“Валера, 11 лет дали. Шёл с работы, нерусские на рынке... ну, видят в рабочей форме идет. Он ему: «Эй, ну как-то назвал его, я тебе стакан налью, машину мне разгрузи». Он поворачивается: «Мразь, ты кому говоришь?» Тот .. ну в наше время чурка ... мы их гоняли, потом менты стали за них – попробуй тронь... ну он одним ударом человека убил.”* I did not succeed in finding of the ethnicity the victim, and assumed this it (except for the fact that he was not Russian) was not important neither for Vyacheslav nor for Valeriy. Later, my informant Roman also used the word *“чурки”* in his interview, and willingly explained that he refers to all ethnic minorities from the Caucasus and Central Asia in this way: *“Чурки – это не русские: туркмены, таджики, узбеки, азербайджанцы и армяне”*. After thinking for a while, Roman added that a Russian man can also be called *“чурка”* but only if he proves himself to be a bad person. As for all other ethnicities, Roman considered them bad until they proved the opposite.

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According to the Demos Centre report, trips to Chechnya were identified as one of the factors contributing to the development of arbitrary practices in the activities of the police after chechentsy returned to their home town.<sup>140</sup> Confirmation of this comes from my interviews. When I asked how Chechen veterans felt after coming home and meeting ethnic Chechens in their home towns, Alexei explained that they were always sure to mete out *“punishment”*:

*“Наказывали. Они [ОМОНовцы] приезжали из командировок из Чечни и рвали их тут на части во время работы, и я это застал. Возвращались и целенаправленно искали этих чеченцев, на рынках выцепляли. Мы их тут не сажали, а выцепляли на мероприятиях, зачистки, задерживали чеченцев, конфликты были [...] То есть, вот это*

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<sup>140</sup> *Militsiya mezhdu Rossiei i Chechnei*, p. 6.

*время, когда срывались на чеченцев. Да и сейчас наверняка достаётся [чеченцам], потому что те же самые люди работают [в полиции] и те же занимаются рынками”.*

Along with the Chechens, other citizens could also become victims of ex-servicemen’s aggression. As my respondent, former riot policemen Sergey admitted, after coming back from Chechnya his colleagues were often not able to control themselves in situations when reflexes took over:

*“Выстрелить в человека – очень тяжело. Вот так вот в спокойной обстановке. Когда рефлексы работают, тут уже всё автоматически. Это тут даже потом уже осознание приходит. Ну вот так вот туда... ну не знаю. Пацаны у нас в батальоне охраняли благотворительный фонд, так называемые отработки были в отряде. Напротив грабили обменник, наши вышли, ввязались, лёгкое прострелили [грабителю]”.*

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Analyzing the wave of violence caused by the return of riot policemen from the Chechen campaigns to their police stations, researchers note the role of the state. Firstly, the state-sponsored propaganda of heroic feats and self-sacrifice (analyzed above) was an important factor. Secondly, the state did not have an adequate rehabilitation system for policemen and almost completely stepped away from their re-socialization. In the absence of such a system, service in the Chechen Republic led to an increase in de-professionalization, and to the social maladjustment of policemen. That also contributed to their separation from society.<sup>141</sup>

Thirdly, the state participated in creating the image of the enemy (described above) and if not actively encouraging violence against Chechens, did not make any effort to prevent it. Thirdly, the large majority of soldiers who committed crimes against the civilian population of Chechnya went unpunished. Although many such cases brought before the European Court of Human Rights have all condemned the Russian state, the latter has never prosecuted any military

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

officers responsible for the offences.<sup>142</sup> In 2005, Yuri Dzhibladze, president of the Moscow-based Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, argued that this gave a powerful signal to state agencies and forces that they are immune from prosecution whatever they do.<sup>143</sup>

The violence was routinized and soon left the borders of Chechnya. At the beginning of the 2000s, mass media often turned to the Chechen experience in describing police violence in other Russian regions. The most prominent examples happened in the cities of Blagoveshchensk, Krasnoyarsk, Bezhetsk and several others, where large numbers of local citizens were beaten up and tortured in police custody.

The mass beating of peaceful citizens in the city of Blagoveshchensk in the Republic of Bashkortostan became not the first but the most brutal in a series of cases of police brutality in Russian cities, and the most striking example of the spread of the Chechnya syndrome throughout Russia.

In December 2004, a fight broke out between residents and the police. Three men were detained as responsible for the attack on policemen. After that, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Bashkiria began what Russian journalists would later call “зачистки” (“a clean-up operation”), using the terminology of the Chechen war. Local police officers and 17 riot policemen chased, detained and beat residents (including the disabled, women and adolescents) for four days. According to the detainees’ lawyer Stanislav Markelov, the beating lasted four days, had an unmotivated character, extended to the entire city and nearby villages, and involved a very large number of victims (officially 342, realistically over a thousand) and significant police forces, including some that had previously served in Chechnya.<sup>144</sup> For example, Oleg Sokolov, one of the riot police commanders, had worked in the riot police for

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<sup>142</sup> Le Huerou, Sieca-Kozlowski, “A ‘Chechen Syndrome’?”, p. 36.

<sup>143</sup> J. Corwin, “Russia: Police Brutality Shows Traces Of Chechnya”, *Radio Liberty*, 20 June 2005. <<https://www.rferl.org/a/1059380.html>>, accessed 24 March 2021.

<sup>144</sup> S. Markelov, “Russia’s ‘Filtration System’”, Robert Amsterdam personal site, 4 April 2007. <[https://robertamsterdam.com/stanislav\\_markelov\\_-\\_russias\\_filtration\\_system](https://robertamsterdam.com/stanislav_markelov_-_russias_filtration_system)>, accessed 28 March 2021.

18 years and had made 11 trips to Chechnya and Dagestan, where he had received three contusions and three medals of valour.<sup>145</sup>

Later the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation opened a criminal case on exceeding official authority by police officers. As late as 2010, ten policemen (including Oleg Sokolov) were found guilty but were given suspended sentences. Before the court verdict, they continued to work in the police.<sup>146</sup>

After the story of the "Bashkir clean-up operation" was widely spread in local and federal media. Many of them published terrifying details, including a description of gang rape of local women (this allegation was not confirmed) or teenagers who were forced to shout "I love the police" during torture (that was found to be true).<sup>147</sup> The level of fear and hatred for the police was so high that the audience was ready to believe in the most frightening rumours.

Later, the republican riot police (OMON) responded by suing the Bashkir opposition newspaper *Zerkalo*, which was the first to report on the Blagoveshchensk events. A vivid detail: the riot police did not appear in court, as they were on a new trip to Chechnya.

Stanislav Markelov emphasized that a punitive mechanism known as "filtration", which has been widely encountered in Chechnya, was officially used during this "mopping up operation" in Bashkiria too.<sup>148</sup> Exactly as in Chechnya, the police operation included the creation of a "filtration point" where detainees were abused and beaten. Markelov points out that the Blagoveshchensk case revealed the existence of the secret order of the MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs] of Russia No. 870 of 10 September 2002 "О совершенствовании подготовки ОВД и ВВ МВД России к действиям при чрезвычайных обстоятельствах" (*On improving the preparation of the Internal Affairs Directorate and Internal Troops of the*

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<sup>145</sup> T. Maiorova, "Ehra bespredela: Pochemu o sobytiyakh dekabrya 2004 goda v Bashkirii sporyat do sikh por", *Mkset.Ru*, 12 December 2019. <<https://mkset.ru/news/politics/12-12-2019/era-bespredela-pochemu-o-sobytyah-dekabrya-2004-goda-v-bashkirii-sporyat-do-sih-por>>, accessed 1 April 2021.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> A. Papp, "Militseiskaya 'zachistka' v Blagoveshchenske", *Informatsionno-analiticheskii tsentr 'Sova'*, 11 February 2005. <<https://www.sova-center.ru/democracy/publications/2005/02/d3864>>, accessed 1 April 2021.

<sup>148</sup> Markelov. "Russia's 'Filtration System'".

*Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia for action in emergency situations*) which provided a legal basis for the creation of “filtration points” and “police mopping-up operations”.<sup>149</sup> According to Markelov, the order officially entrenched the concept of “filtration point” and the concept of an “extraordinary circumstance” (these concepts were nonexistent in Russian law) which included all events that substantially impacted the lives of people, society, and the state, and allowed the police to apply practically any unauthorized unlawful methods, without bearing any liability whatsoever for this.<sup>150</sup>

The Blagoveshchensk case was just one of several police “clean-ups”. In March 2005, a similar operation took place in Krasnoyarsk, where police patrols during an hour and a half detained everyone who passed by them on the street, and later explained their actions as preventing a skinheads’ gathering. In February 2005, in the village of Rozhdestveno in the Tver Region, massed police officers brutally beat school graduates who were gathered in the rural cultural centre to celebrate the anniversary of their graduation anniversary. As local journalists later established, there was no legal reason for this. One of policemen had a personal conflict with one of the graduates, decided to ambush him at the gathering, did not find him and took revenge by detaining and beating his peers.<sup>151</sup>

In the town of Bezhetsk, also in the Tver Region, two “clean-up” operations took place. In November 2004, policemen of different police units detained, beat and tortured workers of the local market and random visitors. In four months, in March 2005, after a clash between residents and officers of the State Drug Control Service in a local cafe, the latter, with the participation of different police units, carried out a “clean-up”, detained all the visitors of the cafe, and took them to the local police department, where they were subjected to beatings, torture, public

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<sup>149</sup> I could not find the text of the order in open sources but tracked down numerous references to it in the educational literature of police schools. The last time it was mentioned it 2010.

<sup>150</sup> Markelov. “Russia’s ‘Filtration System’”.

<sup>151</sup> A. Papp, “Massovyi proizvod sotrudnikov pravookhranitel'nykh organov: Bezhetsk, Krasnoyarsk, Rozhdestveno, Tabory”, *Informatsionno-analiticheskii tsentr “Sova”*, 11 May 2005. <<https://www.sova-center.ru/democracy/publications/2005/05/d4543>>, accessed 1 April 2021.

searches and humiliation. 12 people were detained officially, and at least 50 became victims of police violence.<sup>152</sup>

Strikingly, in both cases, the victims testified about the Chechen War past of one of the main perpetrators, who had referenced his military experience when intimidating the detainees: *“Меня вызывал следователь Шушлыбин. Он представился сотрудником РУБОП: ‘Меня зовут Юра-фашист, я прошел две войны, мне тебя убить ничего не стоит, мне за это ничего не будет’”*.<sup>153</sup>

In July 2005, victims of police violence from 12 regions organized a movement against torture, clean-up and filtering, *Beaten Russia* (“Россия избитая”). Their founders began their official statement of the new movement by linking the growth of police violence and the war in Chechnya:

*“Карательный опыт Чечни оказался перенесен вглубь России. И покатались волны “фильтраций”, официально называемых “профилактическими мероприятиями”. (...) Мы только начинаем сопротивляться, так же, как и Вы, не имеем средств, часто не умеем поступать или действовать грамотно, но раз на нас первых внутри российского региона стали отрабатывать варианты чеченского умиротворения, то мы берем на себя смелость инициировать это движение самозащиты”*.<sup>154</sup>

Despite the publicity the cases of mass beatings received in the media, almost all who were responsible for them went unpunished or received suspended sentences, confirming Yuri Dzhibladze’s argument that state agencies and forces were immune from prosecution whatever they did.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> From the Radio Liberty interview with Maxim Sidorenko, one of the victims of Bezhetsk beating: “Rossiiskie pravozashchitniki trebuyut prekratit' militseiskii proizvod”, *Radio Svoboda*, 24 March 2005. <<https://archive.svoboda.org/ll/hr/0305/ll.032405-2.asp>>, accessed 28 March 2021.

<sup>154</sup> “Obrashchenie Dvizheniya bor'by s pytkami, zachistkami i fil'tratsiyami ‘Rossiya izbitaya’”, *Grani.ru*, 28 July 2005. <<https://graniru.org/Politics/Russia/Regions/m.101374.html>>, accessed 2 April 2021. From March 2014, Grani.ru website was officially blocked in Russia so the whole information on the movement was not accessible for the citizens since then.

Several other important consequences of the Chechen wars for Russian society should be noted here. Firstly, military political analysts claim that the wars enhanced the influence of the soldiers; high officials from the Interior Ministry and security services entered the political life of the country.<sup>155</sup> Many former Chechen War commanders entered politics, were promoted as leaders of Russian regions (General Vladimir Shamanov was elected governor of Ulyanovsk region in 2001), became presidential plenipotentiaries in the federal districts (General Viktor Kazantsev and General Konstantin Pulikovsky) or, in the case of General Gennady Troshev, a presidential advisor. According to data from the research on the Russian elite, conducted from 1989 to 2002 by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, during this period the share of military personnel in power increased seven times, and twelve times among those in highest authority. In total, the number of army members amongst the political elite has risen two and a quarter times – from 11.2% in Yeltsin’s era to 25.1% in two first years in Putin’s first term. Notably, the percentage of people with academic degrees among the political elite fell by at the same time by more than half (from 52.2% to 20.9%).<sup>156</sup> In 2002, Russian sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya called the new political elite a “militocracy”, claimed that, after 2000, a military uniform had become an advantage for any political candidate and governors with army background were “fashionable”. Kryshtanovskaya predicted that the future Russian polity would pay more attention to issues of defence, security and the state of the army, a prognosis that has turned out to be accurate.<sup>157</sup>

These changes in the structure of the elite reflected the shift in societal attitudes to the army. As Emil Pain argued, the wars caused the growth of traditionalism. This doctrine regards the state as supreme. It has strengthened the general desire for a “strong hand”, and makes only

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<sup>155</sup> Pain, “The Chechen War in the Context of Contemporary Russian Politics”, p. 74.

<sup>156</sup> Quoted in: O. Kryshtanovskaya, “Rezhim Putina; liberal’naya militokratiya?”, *Pro et Contra*, Volume 7, no. 4, 2002, pp. 161-162.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162, 177.

three institutions— the leader, the church, and the armed forces – fully trusted, while the government, the parliament or courts are not trusted at all.<sup>158</sup>

Another result was that after the two Chechen campaigns, veterans started to discuss every new military conflict as part of the same perpetual warfare which had been going since the Great Patriotic War; as episodes in a never-ending struggle. During the next few decades, this rhetoric of permanent war became even more noticeable. It equalized the Great Patriotic War with the local wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, and later in South Ossetia and Syria. The participants of these wars were likewise assigned to this sequence. Thus, the most important consequence of the Chechen wars was that the concept of perpetual war was further entrenched.

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<sup>158</sup> Pain, “The Chechen War in the Context of Contemporary Russian Politics”, p. 75.

## Conclusion



**Figure 5.** "March of Maternal Compassion" from Moscow to Grozny. The march was organized by the parents of Russian soldiers who had been killed in action, captured, or were missing presumed dead. March 1995.<sup>159</sup>

In this part of my research, I have attempted to study social and discursive shifts during and after the two military campaigns in Chechnya, the post-conflict itineraries of the veterans of these wars and their relations with the afgangtsy.

None of the Chechen campaigns has been ever termed a war. Hence, returning chechentsy never gained veterans' social security or status and were not covered by the law on veterans. However, attitudes to the soldiers of the first campaign were very different from attitudes to participants of the second campaign. The former were perceived not as aggressors (unlike those who had served in Afghanistan) but random victims. Compassion towards them defined the

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<sup>159</sup> Voronka vremeni website, <<http://voronka-vremeni.memohrc.org/node/28>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

Russian media discourse and compensated for the missing ideological component of the war. The media narrative of the first became a narrative of personal deaths, despair and sacrifices.

In contrast, the second war in Chechnya began with the media blaming soldiers for human rights violations and killings of civilians but soon, accompanied by an informational blockade and supported by the majority of the population, became a story of military feats and heroism. The state presented the war as a part of the wider and just global fight against international terrorism, and the public discourse shifted from victimization of Russian soldiers and veterans to their glorification. The state also launched an official military patriotic campaign. The central figures of the new official state discourse of the Chechen war became the paratroopers of the Sixth Company of the 76th Airborne Division, killed in Chechnya. At the beginning of the 2000s, they have become the main symbol of this war and of military heroism as such.

Nevertheless, after returning home, veterans of both wars in Chechnya faced social stigmatization, and the unwillingness of civilians to deal with people potentially suffering from psychological traumas and prone to violence. Thus, they felt the same sense of disrespect and abandonment by the state as the Afghan veterans had previously.

Due to a lack of upward mobility, veterans became professional mercenaries or went to serve in police or private paramilitary organizations. At the same time, in Russia, the homecoming of a huge number of veterans, together with the new state discourse, resulted in the dehumanization of the Chechens and creation of a distorted image of the enemy. Acts of violence against former enemies (or any enemies, or simply ordinary members of the public) were committed by the police outside Chechnya and, later, the same methods of police beatings, torture and “clean-up” operations started appearing in police stations and on police operations all over Russia.

In the 2000s, this was followed by militarization of the Russian elites. In particular, numerous military generals who were veterans of the Chechen wars entered political life, some rising to high government posts. Official discourse connected Soviet and Russian soldiers of

different wars and built an image of a never-ending war, which would be continued into the future. The military domination of Russian society was thus connected with the rise of aggressive patriotism on the political scene.

## CHAPTER 3

**“Boys Should Prepare Themselves for Becoming Soldiers,  
Girls — for Becoming Combat Nurses”:  
Military Service and Masculinity**



**Figure 1.** Festival “В армии служить почетно!” (“It is honourable to serve in the army!”) in the city of Orel in 2015.<sup>1</sup>

Bulat, the sixty years old head of the Union of War Invalids from Chelyabinsk, came to his interview with me bringing Elena, a calm, beautiful woman in her forties. He introduced her as his assistant. After a couple of hours he became more relaxed and clarified that “*мы с Еленой на ее свадьбе познакомились. И вот как сложилось: двадцать лет дружим. Теперь уже, можно сказать, живем [вместе]*”.

Bulat was deployed to Afghanistan in 1982 as a conscript and was invalided out of the army after four serious injuries. Lean, gray-haired, dark-skinned, walking with a visible limp, Bulat looked shady and charismatic simultaneously. In the interview, he told me how he had

<sup>1</sup> The photograph was originally published on the Orel Cultural Centre website <<https://www.ogck.ru/video-foto/v-armii-slujit-pochetno/>>, accessed 22 May 2022.

organized a mafia gang and engaged in racketeering in the 1990s; served a prison sentence for extortion in the 2000s; started a legal business, became an assistant deputy, then the head of the veteran organization and an enthusiastic teacher of school “patriotic lessons” in 2010s. During the entire interview, Elena did not take her big brown eyes with long lashes off Bulat. Gradually, I found out that Elena had been a housewife for her entire married life. Then she had divorced. She thought she never could be able to go to work; she did not even know how to use a computer. But Bulat said that she was capable of learning it, and so she did. Elena has been assisting him for three years already and learned everything he wanted her to learn. She had never been interested in Afghanistan, or wars, or “patriotism”.<sup>2</sup> But now her daughter was learning Afghan soldiers’ songs and singing them at patriotic festivals, according to Elena, to great acclaim. Elena’s son is now a student at a technical college in Bulat’s hometown, Mamadysh, in Tatarstan, 800 kilometers from Chelyabinsk. He often calls Elena at night, cries and asks her to allow him to come home, but Bulat says it will be better for him to stay there, and that living on his own in a dormitory will make him a man. Elena says that she trusts Bulat. As a man, he knows what is best.

Elena’s case seems to be extreme, but during my fieldwork I met a lot of wives of ex-combatants whom, most often, were silent and seemed to be following their husbands’ will. If in the first two chapters of this thesis I tried to analyze the relationship between the army military and society, in this part of my research I shall focus on how, through wars, the militaristic rhetoric and patriotic mobilization of the 2010s, the state has shaped the image of a “real man” and a “real woman”. I am interested not only in the military ethos (which has been relatively stable and independent of social change) but also in what remains after the end of the war at the level of social conventions and norms. Within the framework of this thesis, I will not be able to consider all the effects of wars on different aspects of public life (for example, the evolution of the image of the enemy or changes in the concept of civil and military duty deserve

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<sup>2</sup> This term is widely used in Russia, as here, to refer to official militaristic propaganda.

separate chapters). However, I shall look in this chapter at changes in gender roles and the concept of masculinity which allow me to demonstrate the all-encompassing influence of the army and the spread of a military ethos in civil society.

The Soviet state played a significant role in the framing and constitution of images of men and women, and relations between them.<sup>3</sup> Throughout its existence, the USSR formed and changed gender roles in accordance with the higher aim of serving the needs of the state.<sup>4</sup> Gender researcher Sarah Ashwin claims that from its creation and in order to consolidate its rule, the new Soviet state promoted and institutionalized a distinctive “gender order”; she describes Soviet-era gender relations as a triangular set in which the primary relationship of individual men and women was with the state rather than each other. Women’s role was to work, produce future generations of workers and run a household. Men had to manage and build the communist system. Meanwhile, the state was assumed responsible for the fulfillment of the traditional masculine roles of father and provider, becoming, an effect, a universal patriarch to which both men and women were subject. In this way, masculinity became socialized and embodied in the Soviet state, the masculinity of individual men being officially defined by their position in the service of that state. Women were liberated from the patriarchal family and transferred from private dependence on men to the “protection” of the Soviet state.<sup>5</sup>

Sociologist Ellen Jones also claims that the Bolshevik revolution involved a major transformation in gender roles and championed women’s legal and social equality. Marxist

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<sup>3</sup> A. Gileva, "Dlya muzhchin ogromnaya problema, chto zhenshchiny opredelyayut teper' svoyu zhizn' sami": sotsiolog Irina Tartakovskaya — ob ehvolyutsii gendernykh standartov v Rossii', *Nozh*, 9 December 2021. <<https://knife.media/new-masculinity>>, accessed 24 December 2022.

<sup>4</sup> For more about the Soviet and post-Soviet ‘gender order’ see: L. Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-role Socialization in the USSR*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990; M. Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989; M. Eichler, “Gender and Nation in the Soviet/Russian Transformation”, *Gendering the Nation-State. Canadian and Comparative Perspectives*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008, pp. 46-59; S. Ashwin, ed., *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, London: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> S. Ashwin, “Introduction”, *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, London: Routledge, 2000.

theory linked females' exploration with the capitalist economic system. Besides, the modernization of the country could not be accomplished without female participation.<sup>6</sup>

Gender roles were repeatedly changed throughout the existence of the Soviet state. The first alteration of significance was Stalin's declaration in 1930 that "the woman question has been solved", followed by the closure of the Party women's sections and, six years later, the tightening of legislation relating to divorce and abortion. In 1943, single-sex education was introduced at secondary level, and in 1944, legislation on marriage and divorce was tightened. Some of these measures were reversed in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>7</sup> The next major shift, now in the other direction, occurred in the 1970s. Sociologist Lynne Attwood argues that because of a necessity to change the country's demography and to obtain larger numbers of children who would become future workers and soldiers, the Soviet government started promoting a more conservative gender approach and traditional family values. Women, who previously were primarily perceived as workers, now had their roles as mothers and housewives boosted. Practical measures aimed at encouraging women to have more children were introduced under Brezhnev (entitlement to a year's maternity leave on part pay from 1981) and extended by Gorbachev at the next Party congress.<sup>8</sup>

An important element of building the state concept of gender relations was that the ideology of militarism linked men with the military<sup>9</sup> and gave them the role of protectors, both of their families and the state in general. Women extended protection mainly at an individual or family level, and in terms of social relations were dependent on the protection of men.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> E. Jones, *Red Army and Society*, Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*.

<sup>8</sup> Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> M. Eichler, *Militarizing Men. Gender, Conscription, and War in Post-Soviet Russia*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 2, 110.

<sup>10</sup> The Soviet and post-Soviet discourse linked wars and protection, and the most common cliché for soldiers was "защитник отечества". From 2021, this term appeared in the revised Russian Constitution: "Российская Федерация чтит память защитников Отечества". ("Konstitutsiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii" (prinyata vsenarodnym golosovaniem 12.12.1993 s izmeneniyami, odobrennymi v khode obshcherossiiskogo golosovaniya 1.07.2020). Stat'ya 67/1. <[http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_28399/95c44edbe33a9a2c1d5b4030c70b6e046060b0e8/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_28399/95c44edbe33a9a2c1d5b4030c70b6e046060b0e8/)>, accessed 6 April, 2022.)

At the same time, militarized masculinity fundamentally shaped the experience and identity of those who served. What it meant to be a warrior or a mother of a warrior lay at the heart of the state's conscription policy. Political scientist Maya Eichler notes that Soviet policymakers considered obligatory male military service not only fundamental to reproducing the country's military might but also a key element in the construction of Soviet identity. They perceived the army as the primary institution of male socialization and a "school of the nation" that would create "prototypes of the new 'Soviet man'" and mould young men into patriotic and loyal citizens.<sup>11</sup> Veterans of the Great Patriotic War were perceived as heroes, symbols of masculinity and role models for every young man; front-line brotherhood during this war became a benchmark of human relations.<sup>12</sup>

Perestroika, the collapse of the USSR and the transition to a market economy in the 1990s gave rise to new forms of hegemonic masculinity, which quickly arose and disappeared. For example, some sociologists have discussed the masculinity of the new Russian businessman or a mafia godfather.<sup>13</sup> All the same, militarized gender norms have survived and revived in the new Russia. As Maya Eichler points out, the state's monopoly of organized violence was undermined, but new private security firms flourished, hiring large numbers of former soldiers. Movies and other cultural production also celebrated violent masculinity.<sup>14</sup>

In Putin's Russia, a major army reform together with a new wave of patriotic mobilization and military mobilization were early steps towards authoritarianism.<sup>15</sup> Because of the lack of other easily available sources of legitimation, militarism together with nationalism and

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<sup>11</sup> Eichler, *Militarizing Men*, p. 491.

<sup>12</sup> I. Kon, *Muzhchina v menyayushchemsya mire*, Moscow: Vremya, 2009. <[https://bookap.info/vozrast/kon\\_muzhchina\\_v\\_menyayushchemsya\\_mire/](https://bookap.info/vozrast/kon_muzhchina_v_menyayushchemsya_mire/)>, accessed 23 December 2021.

<sup>13</sup> I. Tartakovskaya, "Maskulinnost': chto ehto znachit segodnya?", *Colta.ru*, 18 December 2019. <<https://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/23230-maskulinnost-dlya-chaynikov-lektsiya-1-zachem-izuchat-maskulinnost>>, accessed 18 November 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Eichler, *Militarizing Men*, p. 492.

<sup>15</sup> I have discussed this topic at more length in Chapter 1.

patriotism became central to political leaders' attempts to gain, or strengthen their grip on, power.<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter, using oral interviews with former combatants, I shall study how local wars transformed Russian definitions of masculinity and shaped gender roles. I am interested in how the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya changed the perception of a "real man" and the question of what the basic characteristics and traits of a "real man" may be for veterans. Are the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the late Soviet discourse of the crisis of masculinity manifested in interviews with veterans of recent military conflicts? Is military service still considered to be an initiation into masculinity and a rite of passage? How is the concept of the battle brotherhood connected with the concept of masculinity?

Using analyses of material derived from my interviews, I shall aim to demonstrate that a master narrative of war service as a way of manifesting masculinity and fulfilling men's fundamental destiny was used by my informants for hiding the ideological vacuum of the wars in which they participated. Further, I shall argue that even after demobilization, ex-servicemen preserved the same militarized perception of masculinity as an inherent part of their identities and status within the society.

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Following the consensus in contemporary gender studies theory, I perceive gender as "an actively constructed social accomplishment",<sup>17</sup> and use the term "hegemonic masculinity", introduced by the sociologist Raewyn Connell, who defines it as the configuration of gender practice which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Eichler, *Militarizing Men*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> F. J. Barrett, "Hegemonic Masculinity: The US Navy", *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, p. 77.

Besides the classical research on masculinity,<sup>19</sup> in this chapter, I will refer to studies on late- and post-Soviet gender norms written by Russian sociologists Igor Kon, Anna Temkina, Elena Zdravomyslova and Irina Tartakovskaya, and devoted to the transformations of various models of masculinity in Russia.<sup>20</sup> However, all these works were written in 1990-2000 and they do not specifically focus on the militarized masculinity that I am interested at. Another useful work that, without being focused precisely on gender roles, illuminates these in interesting ways is Aleksey Levinson's article "Armiya kak institut sotsializatsii" ("The Army as an Institute of Socialisation").<sup>21</sup> It analyzes the role of the army as an institution of socialization and traces changes to this socialization process in the second part of the twentieth century, claiming that they went in parallel with changes in the role of the family.

Alongside this, I address a number of studies written on more narrow topics and analyzing connections between gender, army and masculinity. Mostly, there are different case studies on the American military. For example, useful for my purposes is a book written by anthropologist Kenneth MacLeish, *Making War at Fort Hood*, focused on the routinization of violence and dynamics of family life of soldiers living in a big US military installation,<sup>22</sup> and also an article about the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the US Navy, written by Frank Barrett.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For example, R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power*. Cambridge: Polity, 1987; R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995; M. Kimmel, *Angry White Men. American Masculinity at the End of the Era*, New York: Nation Books, 2013; E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, I. S. Kon, *Muzhchina v menyayushchemsya mire*, Moscow: Vremya, 2009; E. Zdravomyslova, A. Temkina, "The Crisis of Masculinity in Late Soviet Discourse", *Russian Studies in History*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2012, pp. 13-34; E. Zdravomyslova, A. Temkina, *12 lektii po gendernoi sotsiologii*, St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta, 2015; E. Zdravomyslova, A. Temkina, "Sovetskii ehtakraticeskii gendernyi poryadok", *Sotsial'naya istoriya. Zhenskaya i gendernaya istoriya*. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2003, pp. 436-463; I. Tartakovskaya, "Maskulinnost': Chto ehto znachit segodnya?", *Colta.ru*, 18 December 2019. <<https://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/23230-maskulinnost-dlya-chaynikov-lektsiya-1-zachem-izuchat-maskulinnost>>, accessed 18 November 2022; I. Tartakovskaya, "Pamyat' ob uchastii v voennykh deistviyakh kak resurs konstruirovaniya maskulinnosti", *Sposoby byt' muzhchiny: transformatsii maskulinnosti v XXI veke*, Moscow: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2013; I. Tartakovskaya, "Sovetskaya gegemonnaya maskulinnost' i opyt uchastiya v afganskoj voine", *Puti Rossii: novye yazyki sotsial'nogo opisaniya*, Moscow: NLO, 2014., p. 338 – 360.

<sup>21</sup> A.G. Levinson, "Armiya kak institut sotsializatsii", *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost'*, no. 4, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> K. T. MacLeish, *Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Barrett, "Hegemonic Masculinity: The US Navy", pp. 77-99.

Another type of research that I found useful is focused on experiences of actual military conflicts. Most such studies either refer to the experience of a specific war, such as *Gender and the Great War* by Susan Grayzel and Tammy Proctor (which analyzes shifts in hegemonic masculinity during the First World War),<sup>24</sup> or create a theory of new wars, as, for example, *Masculinity and New War* by David Duriesmith, which recognizes fundamental differences from traditional combat patterns in the recent military campaigns (which are often based on violence against the civilian population), but claims that the concept of masculinity behind them has not changed.<sup>25</sup>

I also make use of studies focused on the connection between gender and the military in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia. The most important for me are the works written by political scientist Maya Eichler, whose articles<sup>26</sup> and the book *Militarizing Men*<sup>27</sup> are focused on the link between military service and male identity in post-Soviet Russia and, precisely, on the militarized masculinity shaped by the Chechen wars. One of the chapters of Eichler's book is dedicated to veterans of the Chechen wars and is particularly useful to my research.

True, in some respects Eichler's book now seems over-optimistic, as in her use of the term "post-military society", relating to how the post-Soviet liberal economic transformation shaped state-society relations and undermined societal acceptance of men's obligatory military service and of its link to patriotism.<sup>28</sup> Eichler's book was published in 2012, before the annexation of Crimea, the wars in Ukrainian Donbass and Syria and the whole new wave of a military mobilization in Russia which rapidly changed the relations between society and the army and,

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<sup>24</sup> S. Grayzel, T. Proctor, *Gender and the Great War*, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> D. Duriesmith, *Masculinity and New War: the Gendered Dynamics of Contemporary Armed Conflict*, London; N.Y.: Routledge, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> M. Eichler, "Gender and Nation in the Soviet/Russian Transformation", *Gendering the Nation-State. Canadian and Comparative Perspectives*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008, pp. 46-59; Eichler, "Russia's Post-Communist Transformation", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, no. 8(4), 2006, pp. 486-511; Eichler, "Russian Veterans of the Chechen Wars. A Feminist Analysis of Militarized Masculinities", *Feminism and International Relations. Conversations about the Past, Present and Future*, London, N.Y.: Routledge, 2011, pp. 123-140.

<sup>27</sup> M. Eichler, *Militarizing Men. Gender, Conscription, and War in Post-Soviet Russia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Eichler, *Militarizing Men*, p. 80.

sadly, showed the erroneousness of this conclusion. All the same, some of the individual insights in Eichler's work retain their value.

Among more recent works I cite an article by historian Magali Delaloye "Heal and Serve" that analyzes how medical doctors working on Soviet military bases in Afghanistan constructed their macho presentation of self in a war situation and how they managed their position within the military community.<sup>29</sup>

I have also found useful articles by sociologists working on Russian veterans' communities. For example, Fedor Nikolai and Aleksandr Mordvinov analyze the concept of courage in oral interviews with veterans of local wars.<sup>30</sup> Natalia Danilova surveys memoirs and literary texts of veterans to establish different types of social practices that represent different types of masculinity (for example, Danilova distinguishes between the masculinity expected of soldiers and that expected of officers).<sup>31</sup>

While drawing on some arguments expressed by earlier writers, I differ from work in the field to date in that I attempt to study changes in the concept of masculinity and gender norms shaped by the army, using my interviews with the veterans of the local wars. My interviews were conducted during fieldwork that is much more recent than previous studies in the field, in 2019-2021, a period shaped by the significant upsurge in militarization that followed the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and a prelude to the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. At the same time, it points to the continuing viability of some rather traditional elements in military masculinity.

Unlike discussions to date, I try to trace the attitude of military personnel towards women, and study how soldiers build their identity in the context of comparisons to civilians. One

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<sup>29</sup> M. Delaloye, "Heal and Serve. Soviet Military Doctors 'Doing Masculinity' during the Afghan War (1979-1989)", *Aspasia*, vol. 15, 2021, pp. 120–139.

<sup>30</sup> F. Nikolai, A. Mordvinov, "Kontsept 'muzhestvo' v vospominaniyakh veteranov lokal'nykh voyn: na styke ustnoi istorii i fenomenologii frontovogo opyta", *Noveishaya istoriya Rossii*, 2019, vol. 9., no. 2., pp. 515-525.

<sup>31</sup> N. Danilova, "Srochniki, pidzhaki, professionaly: muzhestvennosti uchastnikov postsovetskikh voyn", *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsial'noi antropologii*, 2005, vol. VIII, no. 2, p. 110-126.

important point is the pervasiveness of a contrast with women as "others". I also try to look at self-perception of female civilian employees on military bases.

### The “Crisis of Masculinity” Discourse and the Image of a Father

As Russian gender sociologists argue, the “crisis of masculinity” was a discursive fact, generally recognized in late Soviet critical discourse and reproduced both in academic and journalistic publications. The discussion about it was started by demographer Boris Urlanis in a favourite media source of the late Soviet intelligentsia, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, in 1968.<sup>32</sup> Later, this discourse was widely used by sociologists.<sup>33</sup>

This discourse was based on a theory of male victimization. According to it, the generation of men that grew up after the Great Patriotic War considered themselves losers in comparison with the normative models of hegemonic masculinity; as passive victims, rather than active social agents capable of creating their own destiny. Alongside hypotheses based on historically specific features came assertions related to physiological generalizations: men biologically were less viable than women (for instance, their life expectancy was 10 years shorter), and the modernization and development of technology brought more threats to them.<sup>34</sup>

Researchers connect the origin of the crisis of masculinity discourse with the fact that during the late Soviet period men found themselves in a more vulnerable position than emancipated, socially protected women. The Soviet gender policy, as Irina Tartakovskaya notes, was aimed at supporting women and made them dependent more on the state (which provided them with social benefits, places for their children and jobs) than their husbands.<sup>35</sup> The prevailing discourse emphasized that, when set alongside the emancipated Soviet woman,

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<sup>32</sup> B. Urlanis, “Beregite muzhchin!”, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, M., 24 July, 1968.

<[https://www.academia.edu/42736019/Борис\\_Урланис\\_Берегите\\_мужчин\\_](https://www.academia.edu/42736019/Борис_Урланис_Берегите_мужчин_)>, accessed 5 April 2022.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example A. Kharchev, M. Matskovskiy, *Sovremennaya sem'ya i ee problemy. Sotsial'no-demograficheskoe issledovanie*, Moscow: Statistika, 1978.

<sup>34</sup> Urlanis, “Beregite muzhchin!”

<sup>35</sup> I. Tartakovskaya, “Pamyat' ob uchastii v voennykh deistviyakh kak resurs konstruirovaniya maskulinnosti”, *Sposoby byt' muzhchinoi: transformatsii maskulinnosti v XXI veke*, Moscow: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2013, p. 99.

a man found it complicated to operate as a member of the stronger sex. He was dependent, downtrodden, and manipulated (i.e. derogated), whereas Soviet mothers and wives occupied a position of strength. Women's power was viewed as a threat to true masculinity, and the responsibility for masculinity's failure to measure up was laid on mothers and wives.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, as sociologist Igor Kon argued in the late 1990s, social and political life was controlled by the "maternal care of the party", which left little space for individual initiative and independence on men's part.<sup>37</sup> The impossibility of fulfilling traditional male roles, connected with lack of political freedom, was implicitly considered the cause of the destruction of true masculinity.<sup>38</sup> Igor Kon deduces that the only institution that allowed men to build this was the army. Soviet men were able to become "real men" only while they were "serving the Motherland", which meant unconditional and selfless participation in the implementation of state projects.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, militarized masculinity became crucially important during this time. As Irina Tartakovskaya notes, for many of the veterans, the army was a resource for male self-affirmation. However, there is important to consider factors of class here. The discourse of the "crisis of masculinity" was most of all evident among intelligentsia social circles. At the time when it became widespread, the draft-dodging was common and relatively easy for conscripts. The majority of the soldiers consisted of young men from lower social classes. I assume that for them, it was more a question of reinforcement of traditional working-class perceptions of male identity by attitudes in the military.

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Researchers of the crisis of masculinity discourse have identified several models of hegemonic masculinity that were replicated by Soviet cinema, literature and media and recognized as normative. One is the image of a patriarchal Russian peasant (a key character in

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<sup>36</sup> E. Zdravomyslova, A. Temkina, "The Crisis of Masculinity in Late Soviet Discourse", *Russian Studies in History*, 2012, no. 51 (2), p. 26.

<sup>37</sup> Kon, *Muzhchina v menyayushchemsya mire*.

<sup>38</sup> E. Zdravomyslova, A. Temkina, *12 Lektsii po gendernoi sotsiologii*, St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta, 2015, <<https://postnauka.ru/longreads/55082>>, accessed 17 December 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Kon, *Muzhchina v menyayushchemsya mire*.

so-called “village prose” of the 1970s); others include a nobleman (for example, a follower of the code of noble honour of the Decembrists); an independent free man of the West (a cowboy, a hero of Erich Maria Remarque or Ernest Hemingway; and a father, a participant in heroic industrialization and the Great Patriotic War.<sup>40</sup> The last image was reconstructed by sociologist Yuri Levada in his concept of a “Simple Soviet Man”.<sup>41</sup> As Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina write, the value orientation of a simple Soviet man may be called state paternalism. Service to the state was his basic duty. His life path was that of a soldier-liberator and a builder of the mighty Soviet nation. The life of a Soviet man of the preceding generation was full of meaning. His vocation as a man was to serve his motherland, and this service was well rewarded by his heroization<sup>42</sup> (not to mention the monetary and status benefits which veterans started obtaining in this period).<sup>43</sup>

This image is particularly interesting for my research. While interviewing veterans of the Afghan war, I noticed that a significant number of my informants appealed to the image of a father who fought in the Great Patriotic War as their role model. For example, Aleksandr from the city of Bryansk, who fought in Afghanistan in 1983-1986, made a very typical argument. He said that he went to war voluntarily due to his desire to replicate his father's military experience:

*“Я в принципе настроен был на Афганистан. У меня отец воевал. Я у отца поздний ребенок, у меня отец еще в Финскую воевал. Только отец, он прошел с 39 года финскую, Прибалтика, Западная Украина — вот эти территории присоединялись 39-40ой год. (...) Ну как бы я воспитан был на книгах об Отечественной войне, я очень много в детстве читал. Не столько что-то по литературе [т. е. по школьной программе], а я свое читаю. Пропартизан, пролетчиков”.*

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<sup>40</sup> Zdravomyslova, Temkina, “The Crisis of Masculinity”, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Yu. Levada, *Sovetskii prostoi chelovek. Opyt sotsial'nogo portreta na rubezhe 1990-kh*, Moscow: Mirovoi okean, 1993.

<sup>42</sup> Zdravomyslova, Temkina, “The Crisis of Masculinity”, p. 22.

<sup>43</sup> See M. Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Later in the interview, Aleksandr came back to his father's image and claimed that the war in Afghanistan was in some ways similar to the one where his father fought:

*“Наша война чем-то была похожа на войну ту, о которой, про которую мне отец рассказывал. Партизанская. К примеру, отец-то был на передовой, а была же у нас очень серьезная война партизанская. Очень такая... там все больше на партизанскую войну было, там не всегда ты в лицо встречаешься с противником. Что бы с ним встретиться его нужно вылавливать по горам бегать или сидеть караваны выжидать”.*

Similarly, another informant, Vladimir from Bryansk, explained his urge to serve using the collective image of fathers: *“Отцы воевали. Был пример отцов, тогда не принято было от армии косить”.* I assume that Vladimir is aware of the practice of ducking out of military service that became common in the Brezhnev era, and relates to his father as one who did not try to evade conscription.

According to Roman, a Chechen war veteran from Bryansk, he never planned any other career than the military one due to his family history: *“Я вообще хотел стать военным. По отчиму — я папой называл, он меня воспитал. Хотелось быть этим самым тоже военным, он из Баку, артиллерист был, защищал. Бабушка была зенитчицей. По отцу у меня [дед] кавалер георгиевских крестов”.*

It is typical that the participants of the Chechen wars appeal to the images of fathers, grandfathers (they were mentioned by my younger informants, mostly Chechen veterans, who were born by children of the Great Patriotic war generation), or, rarely, Afghan veterans. Aleksei, for example, a veteran of the Chechen wars, places in a single line his blood relative – his grandfather, the Great Patriotic War veteran, and Afghan veterans, claiming that they all are his role models: *“[Я] хотел боевого опыта, я хотел, как мой дед, участвовать в войне, как старшие мои товарищи афганцы, прочувствовать на себе войну, понять что это такое и получить боевой опыт”.* In his interview, Aleksei repeatedly mentioned afgantsyas

the best warriors and, generally, the ideal of a man: *“Афганцы, они знают цену куску хлеба. И трепать языком совершенно точно не будут ”*; *“Вот у меня ощущение, что дальше, как закончилась Чечня, никто дальше уже не придет из людей с таким опытом огромным как афганцы и чеченцы с первой-второй компании”*. In Aleksei’s narrative, afgantsy take the place of collective fathers for future generations of soldiers, and he laments that children are worse soldiers and not able to defend their fathers’ glory.

According to Aleksei, people who fought with him were not driven by money. Fighting was the ultimate men’s job for them. He does not divide military service and fighting in actual wars. Any service for him should be active service:

*“По контракту служили те же афганцы, ну вот то есть мое поколение, которые выросли на ветеранах Великой отечественной войны. Лично мне хотелось сходить туда, куда ходил мой дед. (...) Хотел боевого опыта, я хотел, как мой дед, участвовать в войне, как старшие мои товарищи афганцы, прочувствовать на себе войну, понять что это такое и получить боевой опыт. (...) Во время боевых действий чувствуешь себя мужчиной, что ты выполняешь по настоящему мужскую работу, чувствуешь свою нужность, необходимость, что ты по настоящему на своем месте. (...) Любой, каждый настоящий мужчина должен иметь опыт боевых действий”*.

I posit that the appeal to the image of a father as a discursive cliché is aimed at legitimizing men’s participation in wars and, more importantly, at giving meaning to senseless, lost and publicly criticized military campaigns. Due to the resort to the image of a father as a real masculine man, the concept of war is transformed: from a fight with a real enemy and an ultimate goal (victory), it becomes an endless process.

Significantly, some of my Chechen informants, like Aleksei, born in 1973, had internalized a discourse that had been developed before they were born. This supports my claim that late Soviet hegemonic masculinity, which viewed male self-affirmation through the prism of public service, primarily in the military, is now part of contemporary state discourse in the Russian

Federation, disseminated to soldiers during their obligatory military service and invoked by state media and by veterans during school lessons of patriotic education.

## Relation to the Military Service: a Job, a Habit and a Duty



**Figure 2.** A rally in the city of Khasavyurt (Dagestan) dedicated to Magomed Nurbagandov, a policeman allegedly killed by Islamic fundamentalists. According to the official story, prior to his execution, the terrorists ordered him to shoot a video urging his fellow policemen to leave their jobs. Instead, Nurbagandov allegedly said "Work, brothers!" The phrase has become a meme. Banners and graffiti with it can be found in many Russian cities.<sup>44</sup>

Strikingly, in the interviews of my informants, the war appears not as an extreme circumstance but as everyday life. “Работа” (“work”) is the most frequent noun that ex-soldiers used while talking about their military service.<sup>45</sup> Vladimir, a former pilot in Afghanistan, called the war an “everyday job” (“повседневная работа”). Ahmed, who fought

<sup>44</sup> The photo was originally published in "Aktsiya: 'Rabotaite, brat'ya!', *Druzhba*, 12 October 2016, <<http://www.orgdrujba.ru/aktsiya-rabotayte-bratya/>>, accessed 24.05.2022.

<sup>45</sup> Researchers Fedor Nikolai and Aleksandr Mordvinov also claim that the metaphor of ‘men's work’ [мужская работа] in relation to military operations is widespread among veterans’ narratives but more common in interviews with soldiers who served on the North Caucasus than among afgantsy, which is connected with the nature of hostilities there. My interviews show that the word “work” is equally often used by all informants (F. Nikolai, A. Mordvinov, “Kontsept ‘muzhestvo’ v vospominaniyakh veteranov lokal'nykh voyn: na styke ustnoi istorii i fenomenologii frontovogo opyta”, *Noveishaya istoriya Rossii*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2019, p. 517.)

in five different wars, claimed that he got used to the war: *“Если ты на войне, ты к войне привыкаешь, она тебе как работа идет”*. Aleksandr, a veteran of both Chechen wars repeatedly called them *“тяжкий труд”* or *“настоящая мужская работа”* and placed military service in a row with other professions that he and his colleagues were doing, including work in security, at the Parachute Research Institute and in PMCs in Syria.

At the same time, the lack of a clear ideology or an understanding of how the end of the war should look and why war was declared, make ex-soldiers see the goal of their service not in the military victory, but in the survival of themselves and their peers, as well as in “work”, i.e. going through the extreme circumstances of the war with the least possible physical and emotional harm. War is also perceived as valuable in itself, a struggle for developing their masculine characteristics, holding the male rite of passage. It all makes the image of the enemy and the number of victims unimportant.

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The connection between hegemonic masculinity and military service is noticeable in most of my interviews and the ways in which my informants contrapose military and civil masculinity. Many deny the existence of the latter and call army service the only real form of male initiation. As my interviews showed, service to the motherland, which results in “a feat” (*“подвиг”*), “heroism”, or simply “maturing”, is discursively placed by the informants higher than personal success, private (for example, entrepreneurial) activity or financial well-being. Many of the informants criticized men that did not go through compulsory military service, including my informant Sergei from Tver: *“Что первой, что второй дочери сказал: если выберете молодого человека, который в армии не служил— даже можете со мной не знакомить. Это категорическое мое такое вот”*. According to Ali from Dagestan, army service should be obligatory for every man: *“Не пойти в армию, не пройти этот промежуток мужчины... Два года армейских он [молодой человек] должен получить. Я даже по походке знаю, кто не служил, даже у взрослых. Педагоги есть, которые не*

*служили — у них отношение какое-то, знаете, женское. Ненавижу. Сю-сю... К самому себе, к окружающим... Нет понятия дружбы братской такой, плечо взаимовыручки, взаимоподдержки”.*

Another informant from Dagestan, Akhmed, also said, that, while giving school lessons of “patriotic education”, he always talked to children about the necessity to do military service, and explained it not by the need to defend the country or fight the enemy, but by the need to go through initiation into manhood: *“Стараешься в школах говорить: ты мужчина, на тебя смотрит мать, отец, сват, брат. На тебя смотрят как на мужчину, защитника. И ты должен в любой ситуации посмотреть, оценить ситуацию кругом и сделать что должен как мужчина, защитить их”.*

Moreover, when I asked: “Could you visually distinguish a combat veteran from a civilian or a soldier who never participated in wars?” almost all informants answered positively. According to Ravshan from Makhachkala, former soldiers behave as if they still have epaulettes on their shoulders: *“Есть некоторые... я имею ввиду, те люди, которые чувствуют погоны на плечах, такие ребята, на которых смотришь-общаешься— они ещё носят эти погоны. Таких людей я вижу, как себя”.* Many informants specified that it is often not the appearance of the veterans that matters, but the way they talk, behave, communicate with others. I conclude that what the informants meant were the manifestations of militarized masculinity.

Counterintuitively, the masculine appearance turned out to be unimportant to veterans. None of my informants, except for two who had to keep fit due to their sports-related careers, were concerned about how they looked. On the contrary, caring for their health, physical shape, muscle mass or a healthy lifestyle was considered by them as manifestations of unmanly behaviour. My informants spoke about it ironically. On the other hand, they willingly shared stories of their feasts with comrades-in-arms, boasting about the amount of alcohol they could drink and hashish they could smoke. Given that the late Soviet discourse of hegemonic

masculinity assumed self-destructive practices expressed in what were officially called “harmful habits” (excessive drinking and alcoholism, smoking, “gluttony”),<sup>46</sup> I claim that my informants considered it all as an integral part of masculine behaviour. The image of a “real man” does not imply attention to his health and body, which became only an instrument for fulfilling basic male duties, including military service.

### **Basic Men’s Traits: Heroism, Courage, Subordination and Loyalty to Brothers in Arms**

What are other traits which a “real man” should have? Firstly, in my interview, the image of the father-warrior is associated with heroism, which is manifested in forgetting oneself for the sake of a higher goal, readiness to give up one's personal fate and personal happiness for the sake of the fatherland or even to sacrifice one's life. As my informant Ravshan said, the ultimate goal of a soldier is to become a hero that is why an opportunity to serve in the army is an honour for a man.

According to Irina Tartakovskaya, the main feature of Soviet masculinity was the constant readiness to give one's life for the motherland or for the values supported by the official ideology. That said, in late Soviet and post-Soviet times, self-sacrifice was not only associated with soldiers. “Civilian life” was supposed to be conducted in a spirit as close to military mobilization as possible, and the metaphor of the armed struggle was widespread in Soviet texts, for instance, when newspaper reports described the “battle for the harvest”,<sup>47</sup> or, for example, the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline. Noticeably, this sort of militarized parlance has disappeared from post-Soviet discursive reality generally, while is still widely used by veterans. In my interviews, I heard it frequently.

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<sup>46</sup> Zdravomyslova, Temkina, “The Crisis of Masculinity”, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

Analyzing interviews of veterans of the war in Afghanistan, Fedor Nikolai and Aleksandr Mordvinov noted the hierarchy of masculinity among military personnel. The masculinity of officers and soldiers, on the one hand, opposes (lack of) masculinity of civilian staff. On the other hand, the concept of heroism, a “feat” as an extraordinary event, contrasts with “courage” which refers to the sphere of ordinary life.<sup>48</sup>

In my interviews, I also identified an opposition between heroism as the final goal and courage as an everyday requirement for a “real man”. At the same time, my informants displayed uncertainty about what behaviour deserved the status of a hero. For example, Rinat, a veteran of three military campaigns from the city of Odintsovo, claimed that a soldier must become a hero, and the title of Hero of Russia was the most honourable for any military man. At the same time, he condemned the decoration of soldiers who had showed heroism in situations of direct risk that could have been avoided:

*“Его представляет к ордену ‘Герой России’. Офицер, расскажи, как ты воевал? Расскажи за свой подвиг? А он ничего не может, так как ничего не знает. Он вел [солдат], его атаковали, он сам по дурацки попал, неправильно вел солдат в горах, нарвался на боевиков, вступил в бой, их побили (...), потерял двух погибших, трое раненых. И погибшим — ‘Герой России’. Или живому ‘Героя России’. А если я сам прошел без потерь, нормально... [я не получу награду] А есть люди, которые тот же маршрут в этом же месте пройдут, получают по башке от противника — и сразу герой”.*

Besides the heroism, the topic of the responsibility of a commander for the lives of his subordinates is emphasized here. In my interviews, high officers and military commanders frequently discussed the importance of saving the lives of soldiers and the emotional traumas which they received by the deaths of those whom they were responsible for.

This is related to the significance that my informants accorded to enlightened paternalism as an ideal of masculinity. Besides appealing to the image of the father who fought in the Great

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<sup>48</sup> Nikolai, Mordvinov, “Kontsept “muzhestvo” v vospominaniyakh veteranov”, p. 517.

Patriotic War, officers often presented themselves as symbolic fathers to soldiers,<sup>49</sup> demonstrating thereby their (high) place in the hierarchy of masculinity. At the same time, as sociologist Natalia Danilova has argued, military commanders make a choice between two main values: the preservation of soldiers' lives and the fulfillment of orders.<sup>50</sup> This choice becomes even more relevant in cases of wars without a clearly defined ideology and an enemy image, such as the campaigns in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Danilova believes that this leads to a crisis of military responsibility and, thus, to a crisis of masculinity. The officers find the way out of it by transferring the responsibility for human losses to those who issued the order. Thus, the career officer turns out to be institutionally subordinate to higher military command,<sup>51</sup> but also morally superior (more protective of his own subordinates), and a better example of masculinity.

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Counterintuitively, in my informants' narratives, the most masculine man was not the one who leads and commands but the one who is ready to submit and follow orders. My informants glorified discipline and obedience and repeatedly came back to the topic of good soldiers who could become good military commanders only after passing themselves through all of the steps of the military hierarchy. According to Sergei, a professional soldier who served in Chechnya as an officer, every man who wants to be in charge should learn to be obedient first:

*“Как говорил генералиссимус Суворов, чтобы уметь командовать, необходимо уметь подчиняться. Человек, который не научился в переломный момент этот, 18 лет, подчиняться, он не станет никогда великим руководителем. Он не понимает. У нас все военные, кому даже предлагали большие должности, они все начинали с маленьких.*

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<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to trace the origins of the image of an officer as a “father to soldiers”, which has often appeared in Russian literature. “Слуга царю, отец солдатам” (Servant to the Tsar, father for soldiers), from the poem “Borodino” by Mikhail Lermontov, is one of the most obvious examples.

<sup>50</sup> Danilova, “Srochniki, pidzhaki, professionally”, p. 122.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

*Потому что он хочет понять работу, чтоб потом, когда он станет [руководителем], он помнил, какую задачу он [подчиненный] может выполнить”.*

One of Sergei’s examples related to the difference between soldiers of the first and the second Chechen wars. He claimed that officers’ work during the first war was much more efficient than during the second. Soldiers of the first war were conscripted; they were young, obedient and did not question orders of the commandment. They were not motivated to fight at first but easily believed that they must avenge fallen comrades soon. During the second war in Chechnya, contract soldiers were used. As Sergei said, they were driven by money only, knew their rights, did not agree to do anything which was not in their instructions and were not obedient at all. According to Sergei, they were not only bad soldiers but also not “real men”.

In his study published in 1993, the sociologist Yuri Levada noted<sup>52</sup> the late Soviet and post-Soviet principle of “hierarchical egalitarianism”— the acceptance of a vertical hierarchy and the idea that the features, virtues and rights of a person depend on his place in the “hierarchy of domination”.<sup>53</sup> As Levada claimed, a typical Soviet person did not think of himself outside the comprehensive state structure and had a state-paternalistic orientation.<sup>54</sup> Analyzing the notion of courage, Igor Kon divided physical and civil courage. He claimed that in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, the latter was much rarer than the former.<sup>55</sup> Talking about courage as an inherent trait of masculinity, all my informants were indeed referring to an ability to do physically risky things facing an enemy rather than to confront military hierarchy or the state.

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As researchers of Soviet hegemonic masculinity note, a readiness to submit to strict subordination is often coupled with an ethos of comradeship and the capacity for friendship among men. Alongside a strict vertical hierarchy, soldiers build a horizontal one. Friendship

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<sup>52</sup> Levada's book is often criticized in the recent works of Russian sociologists but I would like to cite it as an example of the construction of a post-Soviet discourse about the Soviet man.

<sup>53</sup> Levada, *Sovetskii prostoi chelovek*. p.18-19.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 15

<sup>55</sup> Kon, *Muzhchina v menyayushchemsya mire*.

with other men (especially comrades-in-arms) is necessary in order to build a masculine world. According to Igor Kon, “belonging to a collective male body psychologically compensates a man for his personal weakness and lack of independence. Regardless of who am I on my own, in a group of my fellow men I am strong and invincible”.<sup>56</sup> In their interviews, my male informants consistently described scenes of male friendship and mutual assistance; told me anecdotes about adventures with their comrades-in-arms. Notably, military brotherhood is a homosocial structure, where only men are allowed.<sup>57</sup>

According to Igor Kon, the cult of male military friendship is rooted in the Great Patriotic War. Shaping the image of the veteran (widely called “*фронтовик*”) as a symbol of masculinity, Soviet literature started to cultivate the motive of front-line brotherhood as a benchmark of human relations. No other type of relationship could stand comparison with it.<sup>58</sup> My informants often compare friendship, and relationships in general, in the civilian life and on the frontline, every time giving preference to the latter. For example, Nikolai, an Afghan veteran from Bryansk, complains that he misses the battle brotherhood that he no longer observes among the veterans in his city: “*Там [в Афганистане] не только война, там еще, наверное, вот это товарищество большую роль [играло]. (...) Понимаете как, у нас тогда даже не было мысли о том, допустим там где-то слукавить, увильнуть. Конечно, я сужу по тому, как мои друзья поступали и как я сам в Пянце там где-то (...) [Сейчас все] братства никакого нет, я этого не увидел. Братство — это когда помогают по-настоящему, не словами, а делом. А у нас, в Брянске, мне ситуация не нравится*”.

Inna Tartakovskaya notes that, because of the nature of the Afghan war, which made it impossible to talk about any, even local, victories, the main victorious narratives in the officers' memories were dedicated to rescues of their fellow soldiers.<sup>59</sup> The same narratives of saving comrades in battles or scouting missions or dealing with everyday difficulties together are very

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> On homosociality, see Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, passim.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Tartakovskaya, “Sovetskaya gegemonnaya maskulinnost”, p. 351.

common in my interviews as well. For example, one subject of my interview with Vladimir, the leader of a small union of afgantsyin Moscow, related to his fellow officer Oleg, a helicopter pilot in Afghanistan. Oleg risked his life and died while trying to save a crew of another helicopter, downed by the enemy. Referring to the Great Patriotic War, Vladimir explained that all pilots felt obliged to save their peers even if it required them to risk their own lives: “У нас были такие законы: если у тебя товарища сбили — еще с войны Великой Отечественной, когда летчики садились на брюхо на своих ЯКах и забирали своих солдат — ты должен обязательно спасти своего товарища”. At the end of this story, while telling me how, shot down in the mountains, Oleg had left a last audio message on a flight recorder to his six-year-old son, asking him to take care of his mother, Vladimir burst into tears. He had already told the same story to journalists (I found many of his interviews online) and to schoolchildren in Moscow schools, where he had been invited to conduct “lessons of courage”. For Vladimir, this narrative epitomized the military masculine ideal, incorporating all the different sides of manly behaviour: heroic death, everyday courage, loyalty to brothers in arms, strict subordination, the officer as a father to soldiers (Oleg died while saving another officer who was downed while saving a wounded soldier) and the Great Patriotic War as a model of relationships between men.

### Violence, Emotional Hardness and Devaluation of “Others”



**Figure 3.** Graffiti “While a soldier is alive, he fights” in St. Petersburg.<sup>60</sup>

Clearly, violence is crucial, at the very least, for the personal survival of soldiers during a war. An ability to carry out acts of violence becomes the second important feature of a “real man”. Sociologist Morris Janowitz calls soldiers “professionals in violence”.<sup>61</sup> Natalia Danilova claims that the process of learning survival skills, and, hence, committing violence, is represented among soldiers as a process of socialization and maturation of a “real man”.<sup>62</sup> However meaningless or ideologically empty it may seem, war transfers violence into an integral daily practice or an essential condition for doing a soldier’s (“real man’s”) job, and does not, or at least should not, cause any ethical reflections.

Usually, when recalling military service, my informants voluntarily brought up the topic of violence they observed or committed. Many of them deliberately emphasized their ability to

<sup>60</sup> The person on the graffiti is Mikhail Tolstykh (Givi), one of the leaders of separatists in the Donbass war. The photo was published on Twitter <<https://twitter.com/nardrujina/status/879072447508750342>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

<sup>61</sup> M. Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, New York: Free Press, 1960, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Danilova, “Srochniki, pidzhaki, professionally”, p. 113.

commit violence. For example, Aman, a Chechen war officer, who now lives in the mountains outside a village of Leninaul in Dagestan, met me in the doorway of his house and, without waiting for my questions, told me that the main thing he learned in the army was that one should never leave prisoners alive: *“Хочешь остаться живым — надо быть физически готов на все. Кого-то жалеть не стоит. (...) Я вопрос задавал руководителю, полковнику, [зачем] я беру их [чеченских боевиков в плен], когда можно было завалить”*. Irina Tartakovskaya argues that because violence is inextricably linked to the militarized hegemonic masculinity, veterans feel the necessity to constantly reproduce narratives about committing it.<sup>63</sup> Even when I asked my informants nothing about their army service, and suggested they might tell me about their lives after coming home, many of them started their monologues with numerous, usually brutal and heroic, stories about military achievements and successful war operations.

In the interviews, the army appears not only as an overtly conservative male institution, placing masculinity and femininity in opposition, but also as an institution that cultivates, as anthropologist Kenneth MacLeish writes, physical and emotional hardness as one of the key traits distinguishing soldiers from civilians' feminized “softness” and sentimentality. This hardness is associated with men and manly practices, traits, and dispositions, including physical discipline, mastery over one's sensitivity to pain and discomfort, and the suppression of care and empathy, so as to become able to command and inflict violence.<sup>64</sup>

My informants often tried to exhibit their masculinity by claiming their readiness to commit violence or participate in future wars. Often, these discursive patterns had the air of folklore. For example, military recollections of Bulat from Chelyabinsk (he was mentioned above with his girlfriend Elena) were mixed with stories of him protecting Elenas woman's honour from numerous offenders, who dared to make obscene comments about her appearance or to catcall

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<sup>63</sup> Tartakovskaya, “Pamyat' ob uchastii v voennykh deistviyakh”, p. 103.

<sup>64</sup> MacLeish, *Making War at Fort Hood*, p. 18.

Elena. The stories about Bulat physically chasing and fighting the offenders were very similar to his stories about chasing and fighting enemies in Afghanistan.

In many interviews, when I asked my informants about their attitude towards war in Ukrainian Donbass in 2014-2015, they started their answers with the excuse that they were not able to participate in it because of their poor health conditions or family obligations. In several interviews I deliberately pressured my informants, blaming them for not fighting in a war that they called just and significant. Their reactions showed such strong feelings of guilt and self-humiliation that I had to change the topic of my questions. It was clear that my informants were afraid they might be suspected of an unwillingness to fight, which they considered unmanly. For preserving both military identity and masculinity, they needed to display their courage, toughness and perseverance permanently. It is also clear that insecurity about non-military occupations and leading a life without war was a likely hazard of a peacetime existence.

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One of the important consequences of the perception of a soldier as a strong, aggressive, fearless and emotionally hard hero is a denial of the impact of wars on fighters' psyche. Most of my informants deny the existence of post-traumatic stress disorder or any other combat-related problems and do not think that they have ever needed counseling. Many informants claim that only weak men cannot cope with war recollections (and, therefore, become alcoholics and die young) while real men are capable of handling their psychological problems. Very few of my informants acknowledge that they would have been happy to talk to psychologists about their mental issues. During my fieldwork, I met only one psychotherapist professionally working with war veterans. Natalia, an employee of The Centre for Social Services for Combat Veterans in Nizhniy Tagil, confirmed that during five years of her work in the centre, it has always been difficult for her to persuade veterans to visit her. Not more than 10% of them believe that psychologists can help them. Usually, Natalia started working with veterans' wives and daughters, who, in their turn, persuaded their husbands or fathers to go to therapy too.

The rigid image of a real masculine man does not allow veterans to ask for help even though the results of various medical studies indicate that as many as two-thirds of service personnel that fought in Chechnya may have experienced combat-related psychological problems, including psychological stress reactions, pathological psychological reactions, post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>65</sup>

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I would like to identify dogmatism and intolerance as other basic traits in representatives of hegemonic masculinity. According to Zdravomyslova and Temkina, dogmatism and intolerance, positively viewed as fidelity to one's principles, were also typical to the image of the father and derived from his basic functions as a soldierly defender.<sup>66</sup> In my interviews I often came across hatred towards "others": gays, foreigners, draft-dodgers. For example, Andrei, the head of a military union from Nizhny Tagil, told me that during a festival of war songs, *The Afghan Wind* ("Афганский ветер"), which Andrei's union organized, one of the singers looked like an LGBT+ person. Andrei called participation of this person a provocation, the only possible reaction to which could be physical retaliation against the provocateur. According Andrei, beating of a person that looks different, and at the same time wants to penetrate the veterans' environment, was the only possible option: *"До того абсурд. Мы там чуть не убили. Выходит в стрингах, в лосинах, с яйцами, извини меня, вот с такими. Мужчина. Волосы вот такие... Вот тут кольцо, вот тут кольцо, мля... Голубой какой-то вышел. И это еще сын руководителя какого-то певческого хора, который каждый раз принимал у нас участие. Ну, у меня тут такой вот сын. Ну ты его зачем на наш фестиваль? Мы ему ноздри выдернем, извини меня. Вот парни просто-напросто выйдут за кулисы, выдернут ему, из всех мест повыдергивают всё. Понятно, вы потом будете заявление писать. Но вы нас зачем провоцируете вот такими вещами?"*

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>66</sup> Zdravomyslova, Temkina, "The Crisis of Masculinity", p. 23.

My interviews contained many descriptions of different sorts of violence and aggression. Muscovite Aleksei told me about his hatred towards Chechens; towards people who communicate or have businesses with Chechens; towards draft-dodgers; towards a younger generation of soldiers that do not respect veterans enough. Finally, he explained his hatred by how differently life in a peaceful city feels after coming back from the frontline and seeing “mutants” everywhere, a trauma that lasted for several years: “[После возвращения с войны] заходишь в метро — тебе хочется придушить первого попавшегося. Потому что видишь, тут люди просто... видишь, одни мутанты кругом, нормальных людей очень мало... Вот это ощущение постоянно. Потом на нет начинает сходить вот эта острота. [...] Лет пять, наверное, [после которых] остро так не воспринимается”. Many of the informants normalize such feelings of hatred and rage and describe them as the only possible feelings for a soldier.

Who can become an object of hatred? Maya Eichler notes that the exaggerated ideals of manhood that are inculcated through military training often rely on the devaluation of (gendered, racial, and/or homosexual) “others”. “The other” is central not only to the construction, but also to the reproduction, of militarized masculinity.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Eichler, *Militarizing Men*, p. 115.

## Women at War



**Figure 4.** My informants Umizhat (on the left) and Eva (on the right) during their work in Afghanistan 1986.<sup>68</sup>

The most obvious “other” for a militarized man is a woman. According to gender researchers, as a normative model, masculinity is formed exclusively in juxtaposition to the model of “femininity” and in contraposition to it.<sup>69</sup> The notion of anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than what one is.<sup>70</sup> Below in this section, I will examine how the image of women, both as civilian employees on the frontline and as wives waiting at home, fits within the framework of the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Neither the USSR nor post-Soviet Russia (unlike some other countries, for example, Israel) made women undergo obligatory military service. Almost no women participated as soldiers in the military campaigns

<sup>68</sup> This copy of the archival photo was made during my fieldwork in Russia in autumn 2019. Both Umizhat and Eva allowed me to use this photo in my thesis.

<sup>69</sup> Temkina, Zdravomyslova, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Late Soviet Discourse”, p. 26.

<sup>70</sup> M. Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity”, *Theorizing Masculinities*, Thousand Oakes: Sage, 1994, p. 126.

in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Hence, the juxtaposition of male and female soldiers is not a factor of significance for my research, and I shall not focus upon it.<sup>71</sup>

As I mentioned above, all veterans' unions have always been homosocial structures. In 2009, Russian State Duma deputies, including the head of The Russian Union of Afghanistan Veterans Franz Klintsevich,<sup>72</sup> voted to deprive civilian workers who served in Afghanistan of social benefits. This was de facto a negation of women's importance for the veteran movement: 90% of civilian employees of Soviet military bases were women.<sup>73</sup> By analogy with *afgantsy*, they were called *afganki*. The decision of the State Duma predictably aroused their indignation. In their complaints and open letters, women wrote about themselves as a part of the Afghan military brotherhood, and called male soldiers "little brothers" ("*братишки*"): *"До 2006 года льготы у нас были. Да, копейки. Но они были, и вместе с ними чувствовалось уважение со стороны государства, и в душах "афганок" тлел огонёк чувства собственной нужности и сопричастности к великому, потому что — что греха таить? — у многих война осталась самым светлым жизненным периодом и самым ярким воспоминанием. И, когда нас выкинули, как переработанный шлак, у 'афганок' вырвался крик недоумения: 'Братишки, за что же вы нас предали?'"*<sup>74</sup>

In their interviews, women also referred to the topic of military fraternity and identified themselves as a part of it. For example, Eva from Makhachkala, who worked in Afghanistan for three years (1986-1989) as a waitress and then as a head of a soldier's canteen, noted that

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<sup>71</sup> In her book about Red Army and society, Ellen Jones finds an ingenious (although I do not think comprehensive) explanation of why Soviet females were excluded from the military service, claiming that it relates precisely to the role of army service as a rite of passage for adolescent males. A typical Soviet male, she asserts, was socialized in an environment dominated, qualitatively and quantitatively, by females (since most kindergarten staff and teachers were women). The conscript tour was the first sustained contract of young men with an all-male environment; Soviet military officials stressed the importance of providing male role models and instilling masculinity. Use of servicewomen would have undermined the all-male environment and weakened a key aspect of the armed forces' socialization role. (Jones, *Red Army and Society*, p. 103.)

<sup>72</sup> For more on how Franz Klintsevich advocated laws against veterans' benefits, see Chapter 1.

<sup>73</sup> A. Smolina, "Kak predali 'afganok'", *Art of War*, <[http://artofwar.ru/s/smolina\\_a/text\\_0270-1.shtml](http://artofwar.ru/s/smolina_a/text_0270-1.shtml)>, accessed 16 January 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

all bad recollections of the war had vanished from her consciousness, while the memory of friendship has stayed: *“Забывается плохое и плохое стирается. А вот как дружили, как были вместе — это все я знаю”*. Eva internalized the same idea of the “combat brotherhood” as male soldiers, and built her identity based on it. At the same time, Eva did not realize that she was not included in this brotherhood by male soldiers.

In 2019, during my fieldwork in Dagestan, I observed a protest action by local veterans of the Afghan war. More than a dozen former conscripts placed tents in a Veterans’ Park in Makhachkala and went on a hunger strike, protesting against non-receipt of social benefits (mostly free housing and pensions) which ex-soldiers were entitled to according to the law on veterans. I asked the participants of the hunger strike if they would like afganki to join their protest. Male veterans categorically refused and claimed that women have never been soldiers and, hence, were not entitled to any social benefits. Later, in an interview, one of the participants of the protest, a veteran called Ahmed, made a distinction between female civilians and male soldiers, stating that women went to war not to fight, but to earn money, and could not be included in the “military brotherhood”: *“Они были как гражданские люди, не военные. У нас когда были всякие операции, сервис, денежный... всякие вещи приносили, отдавали этим женщинам. Не то что, не это... операция когда, на войну идем, в кишлаке в любом случае деньги берем, у кого какая знакомая есть, отдал, джинсы отдал. Они тоже там живут [в Афганистане]... и упакованные едут [в Советский союз]”*.

In my interviews, ex-soldiers adopted positions of hegemonic masculinity to present women as a special sort of people. Instead of lofty aspirations for battle brotherhood or revenge for the killing of comrades-in-arms, women strive to earn money, satisfy their sexual needs or find a partner, runs the logic.

Representation of women as camp followers’ can be seen in several of my interviews. For example, Ahmed, mentioned above, made it clear that women who worked in Afghanistan always had affairs with officers, and blamed them for low moral character: *“Женщины есть*

*женщины. Там [на войне] тоже она, в любом случае, женщина остается женщиной. Это два, созданные Богом существа, конечно, это глупо было бы, так что я не знаю, даже если где-то как-то... это ихнее. Это природа, не мы такие. Это два существа, которые, в любом случае, притягиваются. Тем более, мужа если нету. У этого жены нет. (...) Такое не плохо, не считаю, не хороший. Им виднее, как людям, как жить. А то, что как она ведет себя — это её жизнь”.*

Historian Magali Delaloye claims that the view of women as promiscuous, even prostitutes, alongside being predominant in society, in collective memory, or among members of the army, was internalized by the women themselves. Even Svetlana Alexievich, in her book about the war in Afghanistan, *Zinky Boys* [“Цинковые мальчики”], a searching critique of official military myths, takes this representation on trust.<sup>75</sup>

Another example of a woman who internalized a negative relation to afganki was Umizhat, my informant from the Dagestani town of Kaspiisk, who came to Shendang (Afghanistan) in 1984 to work as a nurse in a Soviet military hospital. Telling me about housing conditions of female workers, she routinely mentioned that other nurses did not want to stay in a dorm with her because Umizhat was against them bringing men to stay over. Talking about these other girls sleeping with men in a common room, she roundly condemned them: “*Это не красиво, конечно. Вот тут кровать, как в старину, [между кроватями] занавески повесили, здесь одна [женщина], там другая. Это же интим, это же некрасиво [приглашать мужчин в комнату, где живут другие женщины]. Это скотство*”.<sup>76</sup>

Throughout her interview, Umizhat repeatedly returned to the topic of affairs of female workers in Afghanistan. In one of the leitmotifs of her interview, she blamed them for sleeping with soldiers: “*[Женщины ехали в Афганистан] и зарабатывать, и познакомиться, мужчин много. А там женщины в Афганистане это были блядь*”. In another, she

<sup>75</sup> Delaloye, “Heal and Serve”, p. 123.

<sup>76</sup> It is hard to say whether, if Umizhat had not been Daghestani (i.e., a member of a traditional culture with Muslim roots), she would have been so censorious about other women, but whichever way, her interview provides important insights into gender relations in the Soviet army.

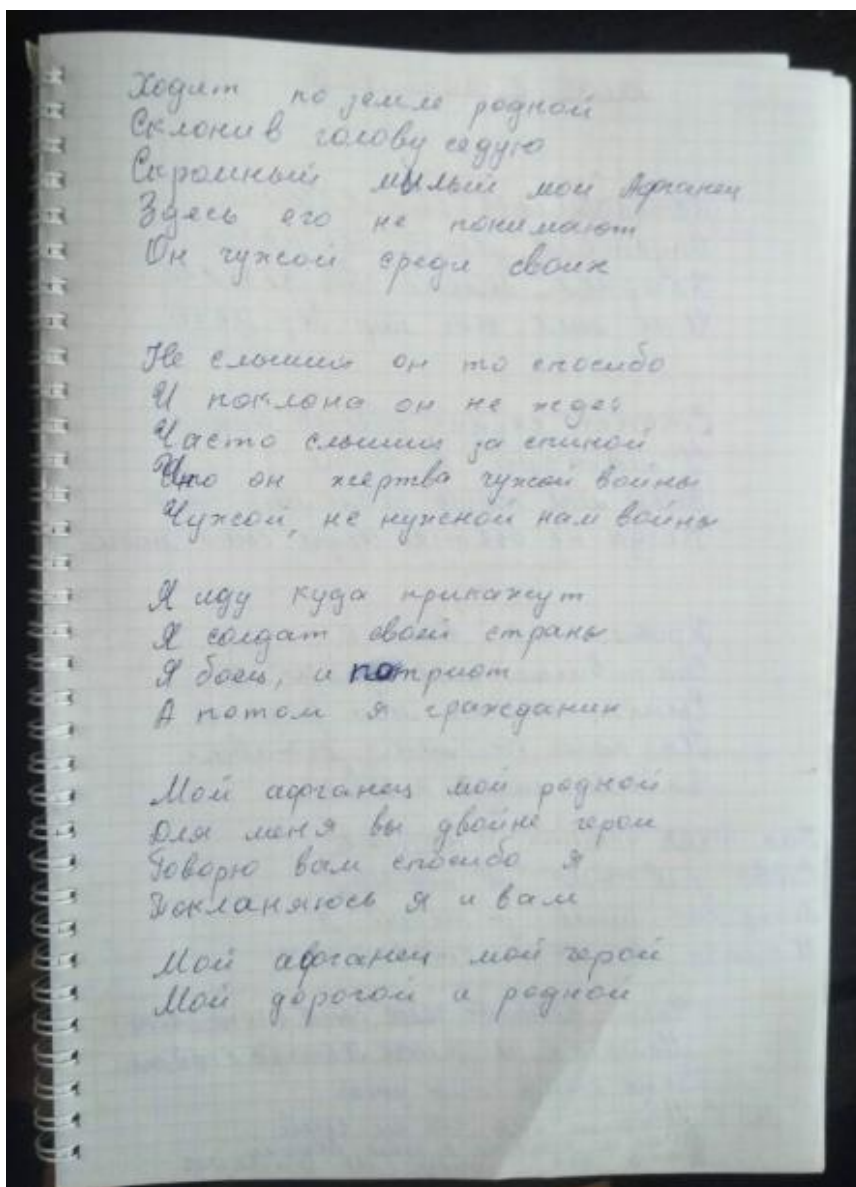
complained that female workers were (presumably, mistakenly) perceived as prostitutes. She specifically mentioned that back then she still was “*девочка*” (a little girl, i.e. a virgin) and was not able to accept the behaviour of other women, routinely meeting men. Umizhat mentioned that Ali, a conscript from Dagestan (he also was among my informants and suggested I talk to Umizhat) heard about a nurse from his hometown, serving on the same military base, but avoided meeting her, assuming that she was as promiscuous as other female workers. He considered it especially shameful for a girl from a conservative Islamic region: “*Потом он признался: я, говорит, боялся, что она встречается [с мужчинами], простоне хочет позориться, типа того, ваша [дагестанка] гуляет. Для нас это позор*”.

The perception of afganki as promiscuous women followed them even after they came back to the Soviet Union. Both Umizhat and Eva claimed that they were afraid to mention their work in Afghanistan in their home cities, expecting public condemnation.

Strikingly, after coming back home, Umizhat never got married and has no children. As both she and Eva (the two women are friends now) explained, it was considered to be a big failure for a Dagestan woman. According to Umizhat, she was not able to understand why no one wanted to marry her but then a fortune-teller told her that it was a spell on her: “*Так мне сказали: есть на тебя порча. [...] Мама мне всегда говорила: ты неверующий, а тебя сглазили. Мама считала, а я вообще не верю таким вещам. Но, оказывается, сделали маме порчу, когда она была беременная мною. Беременной женщине, мне объяснили. Когда я родилась, теперь получила [порчу] через материнское молоко. Ну что же, это богу угодно, что делать*”.

Umizhat explained that the fortune teller lifted the curse when she was 58, so it was already too late for her to get married or have children. The woman said that for her, not having a family or loved ones, the job in Afghanistan is still the most important thing which she is constantly going back to in her thoughts. She remembered every single detail of her service and her

military “brothers”, some of whom, like Ali, she was still friends with. She even wrote poems about her time in Afghanistan, and proudly read them aloud to me.



**Figure 5.** Umizhat’s poem about afgantsy.<sup>77</sup>

Later, in my interview, I asked Eva what she thought about Umizhat’s unlucky feminine destiny, and she found a perfectly reasonable explanation of the magical spell. In a military

<sup>77</sup> The photo of Eva’s notebook with the poem was taken during my fieldwork in autumn 2019. The poem was written in the 1990s and says: “Ходит по земле родной/ Склонив голову седую/ Скромный милый мой Афганец/ Здесь его не понимают/ Он чужой среди своих./ Не слышал он то спасибо/ И поклона он не ждал/ Часто слышит за спиной/ Что он жертва чужой войны/ Чужой, не нужной нам войны./ Я иду куда прикажут/ Я солдат своей страны/ Я боец, я патриот/ А потом я гражданин./ Мой афганец мой родной/ Для меня вы двойне герои/ Говорю вам спасибо я/ Поклоняюсь я и вам/ Мой афганец мой герой/ Мой дорогой и родной.”

base, Umizhat had a romance with a married Russian officer. The relationships did not last after the lovers came back to the Soviet Union. For many years, Umizhat was lamenting her lost love. Besides, she felt guilty and ashamed of her lost virginity, and was afraid to mention her service due to the negative attitude towards afganki at the Soviet Union. Therefore, it was partly the generally negative societal attitude to this women, partly internalization of it by Umizhat which did not allow her to have a family. According to Eva, now Umizhat is obsessed with her service in Afghanistan and has drinking problems (which is very rare for women in Dagestan).

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The story of Eva herself was very different and much more assertive. A former school teacher, she went to Afghanistan to escape her abusive husband who was soon to be released from jail. Eva would not have been allowed to go abroad while being married to a prisoner, so she asked her husband for a divorce motivating it by a necessity to travel to Afghanistan to earn money for their family. The husband agreed, which he would have never done in different circumstances. Eva did indeed send him part of her Afghan salary but never saw him again. Just like Umizhat, she had a romance with a married officer whom she called the love of her life. After coming back to the Soviet Union, she got married and divorced repeatedly; at a stage when she was single, she adopted a child, and now lives alone, earning a living as a bartender and in a low-class bar in Makhachkala's outskirts. She does not hesitate to mention her war experience to the bar's clients, who love listening to her stories before the real drinking starts. I argue that for Eva, her service in Afghanistan was a way to escape traditional late-Soviet gender roles and, by losing her reputation as a decent feminine woman, obtain more freedom and independence. In her case, the negative societal attitude to afganki became liberating.

All the same, just like Umizhat or most of my male informants, Eva is still nostalgic for Afghanistan and would like to pass through this experience again: *“Я сама не могу понять... Я всегда говорю: если бы я была моложе и опять потребовалось, я бы поехала. Я не могу*

объяснить это. Все забывается, все стирается, а это нет. (...) Плохое стирается. А это когда вспоминаю — плачу”.

### Women at Home



**Figure 6.** Winners in the nomination "Fellow Soldiers" ("Однополчане") of the festival of war songs "Afghan Wind" in the city of Nizhny Tagil in the Urals<sup>78</sup>

In their interviews, my informants talk about women rarely. As I mentioned above, females are excluded from the community of brothers in arms and are not part of the power hierarchy. Sometimes they appear in the narratives of informants as girlfriends and wives waiting at home. However, they are not perceived as equal partners. Men do not take women's opinions into account when they choose life strategies — for example, whether to join the army or not. For example, to my question about how his family reacted to the decision to sign an enlistment contract and go to Chechnya, my informant Roman from Bryansk replied: “Я мужчина или

<sup>78</sup> The performers are a married couple. The photograph was initially published at "Festival' 'Afganskii veter', posvyashchennyi 30-letiyu vyvoda Sovetskikh voisk iz Respubliki Afganistan", Tagil'skii rabochii, 19 February 2019 <<https://tagilka.ru/media/detail/index.php?ID=73659>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

кто?”, meaning that of course he had not asked the opinion of his wife. Roman had come back from the war heavily injured but soon signed a new contract and went to the frontline again. Explaining this, Roman acknowledged that his ties with comrades in arms were more significant for him than family ones: *“Людей не было, менять [солдат в Чечне] некому было, а отдыхать-то надо было кому-то. Я тогда в те времена женатый был, ребенок был... Ну я как-то... я за своего батю [командира] больше переживал [чем за семью]”*.

According to my interviews, women are excluded not only from the community of brothers in arms and decision-making but from conversations about wars in general. My informants claimed that any information connected with military operations, fights or military traumas should not reach women. At the end of their interviews, many ex-soldiers told me they had never shared with their wives what they shared with me or, like Nikolai from Bryansk, that they have never told women anything except military jokes: *“Шутки рассказывал больше, чем правду”*. Yevgeny from Yekaterinburg acknowledged that he was writing home from service as a conscript in Afghanistan but never mentioned anything about the military campaign not because of the secrecy but just because he was writing to women: *“Там сплошная лирика, сплошные какие-то такие... Думаешь, где там... Что женщинам писать о войне, зачем это нужно”*.

Women are not expected to participate in meetings of former combatants. According to Sergei from Tver (one who criticized contract soldiers for the lack of obedience), whenever his fellow ex-soldiers are coming to visit, his wife leaves to visit her parents. Sergei was proud that she has never opposed his friends' visits, or asked questions about their parties, or slammed the door while seeing one of his brothers-in-arms as his first wife did. That would mean the end of the relationship: *“Один раз хлопнет — будет лететь с пятого этажа дальше, чем птица”*.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, I do not have enough data to study domestic violence in ex-combatants' families. During my fieldwork, I concentrated on conducting interviews with former militaries while for this topic, interviews with their family members would be essential. I am considering coming back to the topic of domestic violence in the future.

Just like many other my informants, Sergei divorced after coming home from Chechnya, where he served in 1995-1999. He explained that 50% of his fellow soldiers did the same. Wives whom they married before military service, were asking too many questions about what happened to their husbands during the war and why they woke up screaming at night. They also tried to stop men from drinking with their brothers in arms: “[Жены говорили:] ‘*Че вы там на работе [собираетесь с другими ветеранами], сидели бы, блин, дома*’. Ну че, дома так дома. Раз — и собрались на кухне, [...] курим, вопросы свои решаем. И каждые пять минут вот эта вот дверь на кухню [хлопает и заходит жена]: ‘*Да опять одно и то же, да задолбало, да че вы все одно и то же?*’ Ну все, мы больше не встречались, как были на службе — так и стали продолжать [собираются на работе]. [...] Вас вообще это волнует? Сидим, говорим о службе, о войне, о пацанах. Что тут такого, какая криминальная тема, что тут может не нравиться? Еще даже не выпили. Вот теперь пойдём и нажрёмся, чтобы дверью больше не хлопали”.

After his divorce, Sergei remarried, to a much younger woman who never asked any questions. According to him, all of his fellow officers did the same and choose a similar type of women: “*Первые [жены] были всегда лучше. Потому что они прошли с нами то, что эти [вторые жены] никогда не пройдут и не проходили. Но эти... Они все моложе. Они дистанцию соблюдают и понимают, что есть вопросы, в которых они не смыслят, и вообще не лезут туда. Это не их тема, не их разговор*”.<sup>80</sup> According to the interviews, the knowledge wives obtained about their husbands was considered as both an intrusion on the masculine military world (and a threat) and a kind of power, a danger.

Notably, very few of my male informants who divorced have never remarried. Being single seemed inappropriate for them. Only a family was considered as a proper social unit. After divorce, children always stayed with former wives; to leave a child was not considered

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<sup>80</sup> Coming to my informants’ homes, I indeed saw a large number of these young wives. They never participated in the interviews and did not look interested in their husbands’ war recollections.

shameful. Women in my informants' narratives are often devoid of agency and excluded from the men's world. They are considered to be the "weaker sex" and a subject of protection. Many informants claimed that the war against Islamic terrorism on the territory of other countries (like Afghanistan and Syria) was necessary for the protection of their wives and children at home. "Femininity" in the interviews is thus systematically opposed to masculinity. Although, according to the informants, women should not receive information about the war, they also, like men, live in a world with perpetual war and should be prepared for it. For example, Roman from Bryansk mentioned that during lessons of "patriotic education" at schools he always told boys that they should prepare themselves for becoming soldiers, "*devyama*" (girls, but stylistically similar to "lasses") — for becoming combat nurses.

According to Maya Eichler, the late Soviet period saw a retraditionalization of gender roles that was deepened in the post-Soviet period; women's roles as biological reproducers were of primary importance.<sup>81</sup> I would argue that my informants interiorized these new gender roles and preserved them in unchanged form up to the present.

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However, despite the subordinate position in a world of militarized men, a woman is also able to become a hero. As Maya Eichler notes, a mother's militarization is evident in the pride and social recognition she gains from her son's army service.<sup>82</sup> As my informants said, a woman's duty is to allow her son or husband to go to war (or better purposefully send him) and let him achieve the manliness that military experience brings. In other words, she should be ready to sacrifice her son.

According to my interviews, men not only go to wars without asking their wives' opinions but also themselves make the decision to send their sons to the army. Some of them later proudly noted that their wives supported them; others criticized women for the lack of courage and

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<sup>81</sup> Eichler, *Russia's Post-Communist Transformation*, p. 495.

<sup>82</sup> Eichler, *Militarizing Men*, p. 7.

patriotism. In any case, the main female image in my interviews is a crying woman, waiting for her son or husband to come home from a frontline.

For example, afganets Yevgeny whom I interviewed in Yekaterinburg met his future wife before he was drafted into the army in 1985. He proudly told me that she waited at first for him to come back from the war, then for their two sons. Just like their father, they both went to serve in the Air Force: *“Когда у нас первый уходил сын служить, я помню, жена полгода редела. У нас первый пошел на полтора года попал, второй уже на год попал. Она полгода молилась — молитва за воина — и редела”*. Both of the sons were conscripted for the Chechen war. According to Yevgeny, this had a positive effect on his wife “as a woman”. For instance, it strengthened her belief in God: *“Для женщины, мне кажется, это опыт хороший, понимаете? Вот она ждет. Внутренняя работа идет, понимаете, молитвенный опыт начинает возникать. Тут много всего такого. Понимаете, жизнь — она так устроена. Человеку все полезно”*.

Yevgeny also called military service of children a sacrifice to the state: *“Мы к этому относимся традиционно. Семья отдавала сына, ну как бы сказать, в жертву государству. На жертвенное служение государству. Это жертва. Поэтому вот как будет, так и будет”*. After the army service, one of Yevgeny’s sons became Special Forces officer, later a policeman: *“Сейчас он опер, бандитов ловит. Ну, нравится ему это. Пусть”*. My question whether his wife tried to discourage their sons from army service, surprised Yevgeny. He explained that a woman does not have a voice. *“Нет, нет, нет. У нас нормальное мужское воспитание”*, said he.

### **Military Service as a Rite of Passage and an Intergenerational Link**

Significantly, the father-warrior, whose image was described above, can be both a symbolic construct and a real person. Due to the universal conscription in the Soviet Union and Russia, and, I assume, an urge of young people to pass the male initiation and confirm their manhood,

military service in Russia is often dynastic and becomes a means of connection between men from different generations. By the 1980s, army service had lost its high status among young people from educated families and intelligentsia circles, although the army remained prestigious in other strata of Soviet society. By the 1990s, military service had become one of the few paths to social mobility possible for young people with unprivileged backgrounds.<sup>83</sup> That also strengthened its dynastic character.

The idea of the army as a rite of passage is still popular. Many of my informants (mostly veterans of the Afghan war) told me that they were proud of their sons who served in the army too. Several of them claimed that fathers influenced their sons' decisions to choose contract service and go to Chechnya. Afganets Nikolai from Bryantsk told me that his son went to the army following his father's example: *“Воспитывался в такой семье, у меня. Поэтому он служил, конечно. Естественно. Нормально отслужил. Все четко. Ну, дети мои так росли, столько лет. Они же видели папку выступающим [о войне] на митингах и в школе”*.

Sergei, a former riot police officer and veteran of the Chechen war from Moscow, also told me that all his male relatives (except for one of them, whom Sergei clearly did not respect) had been through military service. Sergei proudly claimed that although his older son did not stay in the army after completing] his mandatory service, he connected his life with *“real men's stuff”*. After the interview, Sergei took me to his son's room, the entire space of which, including the walls and ceiling, was covered with rifles and guns. Sergei's son was playing paintball and collecting paintball weapons. Sergei was extremely proud of his son, shooting and chasing foes on a paintball arena almost in the same way as Sergei did in Chechnya.

Despite the fact that many of my informants identified themselves as parts of military dynasties, I would say that in recent years the attitude to the dynastic character of the army service has altered, from the bottom up at any rate. Many of my interviewees expressed regrets

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<sup>83</sup> I have addressed this point more fully in Chapter 2.

that they had not been able to convince their grandchildren (or, in the case of Chechen veterans, their children) to serve. Most of them, like Aleksei from Moscow, explained it by the “too comfortable” modern life and their mothers’ bad influence:

*“Пытаюсь воспитывать, но когда пацан воспитывается, постоянно с матерью находится, то это перегнуть очень тяжело. Они больше к матери тянутся по-любому. Нет такого, чтобы они прям хотели [в армию]. Ну и, в принципе, нет интереса к армии у молодежи. Никто не хочет в армию идти, никто не хочет воевать, интереса нет к военной технике. [...] Хотя я везде с собой таскал, по военным музеям, пытался привить ему изо всех сил, чтобы он спортом занимался. [...] У меня сейчас второй сын во Владимире — ему 11 лет. В суворовское училище я его пытался [отдать], никак. Я его возил на день открытых дверей — никак. Но, опять же, может, они у меня в Москве зажрались опять же. Не хотят. В регионах, я вижу, пацаны-то попроще, им за радость суворовское училище, только возможности нет. А тут на тебе — возможность есть, не хотят. И старший не хотел. И в армию не хотят”.*

During his interview, Aleksei repeatedly returned to the topic of the unwillingness of his three children to serve. He looked very concerned about it. I interviewed him in the city park not far from a playground where Aleksei’s wife was playing with his four-year-old daughter. At the end of the interview, Aleksei looked worriedly at his daughter, complimented her stubborn streak and expressed a hope that he would be able to make at least her, the youngest, a soldier, and convince her to follow her father’s footsteps. In my interviews, it was the only reference to a woman who could potentially become a warrior. I assume that the cause of preserving the dynasty was, for Aleksei, more important than the traditional attitude towards women as the “weaker sex”.

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**Figure 7.** Valentina Melnikova (in the middle) at a rally against compulsory military service. Moscow, 1990.<sup>84</sup>

Valentina Melnikova, the head of the *Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers*, identified a pattern: fathers who passed through army service were often traumatized by it, and later wanted their children to face army violence too: “*Отцы, которых поломали в армии по призыву — они очень сильно хотят, чтобы их сыновья тоже это дело пережили. Это не является стопроцентным, но это является подавляющим большинством и такие истории до сих пор повторяются. [...] ‘Я служил и он пускай послужит’*”.

Melnikova did not explain the causes of this pattern. From what I was able to observe, however, my informants not only considered the army to be the main method of male initiation and socialization, but also related to bullying of recruits as an integral part of it, and perceived this as a way to strengthen the masculinity of a young man.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>84</sup>Photo was made by Igor Stomakhin and published on his Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=5088331787871235&set=pcb.5088338721203875>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

<sup>85</sup> I shall write more about hazing and military violence in the next chapter.

This general tolerance of bullying is evidenced by the fact that since 1989 it has been the female-only *Committee of Soldiers' Mothers* that has disseminated information about violence in the military and has helped a large number of young people to avoid conscription. According to Maya Eichler, Russian men (whether sons or fathers) cannot speak out publicly against military service. It is socially less acceptable for them than for women, and likely to be seen as unmanly.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the activities of the *Committees of Soldiers' Mothers* not only brought public attention to the situation within the armed forces but also challenged prevailing notions of the patriotic role of the mother of a hero.<sup>87</sup>

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The constant confirmation (or reconstruction) of militarized hegemonic masculinity is not just a self-generated phenomenon from within groups of serving soldiers and veterans, but is shaped by certain external factors. As Irina Tartakovskaya notes, the main source of legitimation of militarized masculinity is the militarized state.<sup>88</sup> I would also argue that militarized hegemonic masculinity started to spread widely in society in the early 2010s together with the patriotic mobilization of Russian society. At the same time, the state discourse of the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya began to change. From inglorious failures, these campaigns have become, in retrospect, just and victorious.<sup>89</sup> The view on them changed under the influence of modern political and military events. Former soldiers adopted this new discourse and began to use it to build their new identity and new masculinity.

Irina Tartakovskaya introduces the concept of “imperial masculinity” as one of the variants of hegemonic masculinity, alternative to an individualistic model of masculinity with its high degree of independence and autonomy. Imperial masculinity implies endowing a masculine person with special functions, important on a global scale. It is possible only in a state whose

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<sup>86</sup> Eichler, *Militarizing Men*, p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Eichler, “Russia's Post-Communist Transformation”, pp. 492, 495.

<sup>88</sup> Tartakovskaya, “Pamyat' ob uchastii v voennykh deistviyakh”, p. 112

<sup>89</sup> For more about this, see my Chapter 1.

ideological and cultural apparatus produces an imperial discourse of its “special mission”.<sup>90</sup> Such an imperialist discourse has indeed been increasingly evident in the Russian Federation during the last twenty years. For example, Vladimir Putin repeatedly described the Soviet Union collapse as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the twentieth century (2005);<sup>91</sup> “the biggest disasters of the twentieth century” when “25 million Russian people ended up abroad overnight” (2017);<sup>92</sup> tragedy and “collapse of historical Russia” (2021).<sup>93</sup> The narratives of my informants follow the logic of this official discourse, often imperial indeed. Trying to maintain a military identity in civilian life, the ex-soldiers use this discourse as a basis for building their memories. I believe that by doing this, they simultaneously preserve their military identity and successfully overcome the crisis of masculinity declared during the youth of most of them.

### Conclusion

The Russian army is an institution that not only influences public discourses but also claims, as sociologist Aleksei Levinson puts it, to produce a special type of person.<sup>94</sup> As a result, the army has always influenced the definition of masculinity and the idea of a “real man” that circulates in society at large.

During the last Soviet years, military service was considered a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, and masculinity was directly linked to the military (as well as with patriotism and forgetfulness of the individual needs for the sake of the common good). At the same time, men were not able to express themselves in the public sphere, and the army remained the only place for the implementation of the male role. In this period, the discourse of the crisis

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<sup>90</sup> Tartakovskaya, “Pamyat' ob uchastii v voennykh deistviyakh”, p. 112.

<sup>91</sup> “Vladimir Putin: ‘Raspad SSSR – krupneishaya geopoliticheskaya katastrofa veka”’, *IA REGNUM*, 25 April 2005. <<https://regnum.ru/news/economy/444083.html>>, accessed 7 April 2022.

<sup>92</sup> “Putin ob “yasnil, pochemu schitaet raspad SSSR krupneishei katastrofoi XX veka””, *RIA Novosti*, 13 June 2017. <<https://ria.ru/20170613/1496353896.html>>, accessed 7 April 2022.

<sup>93</sup> “Putin nazval raspad SSSR tragedieii “raspadom istoricheskoi Rossii””, *RBK*, 12 December 2021, <<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/12/12/2021/61b5e7b79a7947689a33f5fe>>, accessed 7 April 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Levinson, “Armiya kak institute sotsializatsii”, p. 65.

of masculinity spread widely, but the army was somehow exempted from the general view of social malaise.

Perestroika and the economic transition offered other, apart from militarized, models of masculinity. The unpopular first war in Chechnya raised awareness of bullying among conscripts, caused large-scale draft-dodging, and undermined the prestige of the army. However, army service preserved its central role in forming male identity. As Maya Eichler stated, in the context of the economic and ideological crisis of the post-communist order, militarism together with nationalism and patriotism became central to political leaders' attempts to gain, or strengthen their grip on power.<sup>95</sup>

The militaristic rhetoric and patriotic mobilization of the 2010s caused a rise of militaristic masculinity. I believe that my informants have not changed their views on the gender norms which they internalized during their army service; indeed, in the new conditions, these norms have only become more tenacious.

As I have argued here, it is above all the image of a father-warrior that underpins military views of male identity. This image appeared in the late Soviet period as a symbol of masculinity and a standard of human relations. Veterans consider military service the only proper method of male initiation, and firmly believe the soldier is the only real man. In this context, I posit that the war is considered not as a campaign against a real enemy but as a struggle for soldiers' symbolic capital, identity and the assertion of masculinity.

A real masculine man, in the view of veterans, must have a number of features. He is obliged to show heroism, sacrifice himself for the sake of the highest goal (usually set by the state) and be ready to give his life for the Motherland or for the values, supported by the official ideology. He must be ready to obey orders and follow the military hierarchy, as well as be loyal to his comrades in arms. He perceives the war as everyday life, the only purpose of which is the survival and preservation of himself and his peers. Violence becomes for him a legitimate

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<sup>95</sup> Eichler, *Militarizing Men*, p. 11.

and integral daily practice, devoid of moral reflections. He must have physical and emotional hardness, as well as intolerance towards the “other”. Often he is not the first bearer of militarized masculinity in the family and follows the path of older generations who were also in the army. He expects that his children and grandchildren will also become bearers of militarized masculinity.

At the same time, the model of masculinity is formed in contraposition to a model of “femininity”. Veterans’ unions are homosocial structures; women are perceived as “others”, or as a special type of human, inferior to men, promiscuous and not included in battle brotherhood even if women are serving in the same military bases. At home, they are a “weaker sex”, a subject of protection. The opinion of female family members does not influence men’s decisions — for example, about joining the army. The main way in which a woman can obtain pride and social recognition is to send her son into the army or, in other words, to sacrifice him. If she protests about the inhumanity of military conditions and war, she forfeits this right to higher status.

Ex-soldiers try to preserve their military identity in civilian life and use it as a basis around which they build their memories. At the same time, this type of identity cannot exist independently; it needs external legitimation, which in turn is provided by the militarized Russian state.

## CHAPTER 4

## Living on a Mental Frontline.

## The Use of War Veterans in Russian Patriotic Education



**Figure 1.** The New Year celebration in the Winged Guard museum. Participants are releasing Santa Claus after a terrorist attack<sup>1</sup>

Santa Claus comes to the steps of the Museum of the Airborne Forces, *Winged Guard* (“*Крылатая гвардия*”) in the city of Yekaterinburg. He waves his hand and wishes everyone a happy New Year. Several dozens of children, crowding around, cheerfully wave back. Suddenly, several shots are heard, and two men in camouflage and black masks and with smoking pistols appear. They grab Santa Claus, hurriedly tie him up, and take him away. Over the next hour, children, under the guidance of “paratrooper Stepochkin”<sup>2</sup> have to locate Santa Claus and free him

<sup>1</sup> The photograph was originally published in R. Lyalin, “V Ekaterinburge edva ne otmenili novogodnyuyu skazku pro to, kak Deda Moroza pokhishchayut terroristy”, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 24 November 2015, <<https://www.ural.kp.ru/daily/26462/3332072/>>, accessed 20 May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> The name belongs to the main character of an animation movie filmed in 2004 for children but regularly shown at the official Conscripts Days for potential soldiers (“V Syktyvkare proshel ‘Den’ prizyvnik’a”, 30 October 2006, *IA REGNUM*, <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/730614.html>>, accessed 14 May 2022.)

from the terrorists, completing several paramilitary tasks. They need to pass a minefield, find an ammunition depot and practice throwing knives. In the end, the terrorists give up and let Santa Claus go back to the children. This New Year celebration, organized by the Museum of the Airborne Forces has taken place every winter for more than ten years. The title of the festival echoes the motto of the airborne troops: “*Save Santa Claus! By Us Alone*” (“*Спаси Деда Мороза! Никто кроме нас*”). In an interview, paratrooper Gennady Kunyavsky, who played the role of the paratrooper Stepochkin, explained to a reporter that the goal of the festival was to teach children patriotism and to show that “Russian paratroopers always come to help.”<sup>3</sup>

Absurd as this event was, it was not at all exceptional. Last autumn, when I visited the Museum of the Airborne Forces, it offered a game for schoolchildren called “Pack a Backpack for a Marine” (“Собери рюкзак десантника”). Participants were asked to choose what exactly (a box of cookies or a parachute) should be put in the backpack of a plush hippopotamus in an airborne vest. The museum also organized excursions for children, shoots in a laser shooting range and a tour to a tank range. In the Museum of Local History in the city of Odintsovo near Moscow, children are allowed to try on military uniforms and hold different types of weapons. The Museum of the Memory of Soldiers-Internationalists in Chelyabinsk collaborates with the majority of local schools in organizing tours for schoolchildren of all ages. The museum director complained to me that the part of the exposition that consisted of cartridge cases and models of different types of arms had to be replenished after every such tour: children steal cartridges and bullets from the exposition.

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<sup>3</sup> Lyalin, “V Ekaterinburge edva ne otmenili novogodnyuyu skazku”. Below the text of the article, there is a remarkable video of the fest.



**Figure 2.** A hippopotamus-paratrooper inside a model of an airborne troops plane in the Winged Guard museum.<sup>4</sup>

Paramilitary entertainment for children and adolescents is not limited to museum tours. The list of activities is long and includes, for instance, a lecture about the dangers of extremism in the children’s military-patriotic camp “Звезда” (“The Star”) in the Altay region. A “lesson of courage” and a workshop on assembling Kalashnikov’s in the Children’s Hospital in Simferopol. The opening of a children’s camp for future border police, Angels of the Frontier (“Ангелы границы”), near Khabarovsk. A drawing competition called What is a Feat of Valour? (“Что такое подвиг?”)<sup>5</sup> Since 2000, when new president Vladimir Putin signed into law the first *Russian Patriotic Education Programme*, children and adolescents in Russia have been involved in a wide variety of paramilitary events. Many of them have been held by veterans of local wars.

In this chapter, I intend to examine the role of ex-combatants in the “patriotic education” of children. This term became particularly common at the beginning of the 2000s. I will show that

<sup>4</sup> The photo was taken during my fieldwork in Yekaterinburg in autumn 2021.

<sup>5</sup> All events mentioned above, were organized by different branches of the All-Russian Public Organization of Veterans Battle Brotherhood, <<https://bbratstvo.com>>, accessed 12 May 2022.

“patriotic” mostly stands for “military”, and that “patriotic education” means offering a range of different paramilitary activities or propaganda of army service. I argue that in the past two decades, alliances of veterans have become the main actors of the state programmes of patriotic education, and I intend to look at how exactly their participation evolved and how it changed the way veterans’ unions have been working. Alongside this, I want to examine the work of the organizations that were established in Russia and abroad in the 2000s specifically for “patriotic” work and consisting of ex-combatants mostly.

In the second part of this chapter, I analyze the main rhetorical moves and leitmotifs of the patriotic education campaign, and try to understand what the “distortion of history”, “patriotism” or “spiritual values” mean in this particular socio-political context.

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The topic of state patriotic education and how it is anchored to the Russian army has been the subject of academic interest since the beginning of the 2000s. However, most of the extensive Russian language bibliography regards patriotic education as an unambiguously positive phenomenon, and Russian universities publish articles with titles such as “How to Teach Children to Love the Motherland: Discursive Practices of the Patriotic Education of Youth” (“*Как научить любить Родину? Дискурсивные практики патриотического воспитания молодежи*”).<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, there are a few researchers who have addressed this topic more academically. For example, Valerie Sperling saw a nationalistic component in patriotic education, and even in the 2000s, warned about the danger that it would start serving the goals of politicians who wanted to mobilize the population for military goals.<sup>7</sup> Douglas Blum, on the other hand, claimed that patriotic education emphasized the state, as well as the primacy of obligations over rights, and was

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<sup>6</sup> E. Omel'chenko, “Kak nauchit' lyubit' Rodinu? Diskursivnye praktiki patrioticheskogo vospitaniya molodezhi”, *S chego nachinaetsya Rodina: molodezh' v labirintakh patriotizma*, Ulyanovsk: Ul'yanovsk State University, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> V. Sperling, “Making the Public Patriotic: Militarism and Anti-militarism in Russia”, M. Laruelle (ed), *Russian Nationalism the National Reassertion in Russia*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, pp. 218-271; V. Sperling, “The Last Refuge of a Scoundrel: Patriotism, Militarism and The Russian National Idea”, *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2003, pp. 235-253.

seeking to limit grassroots democratization and freedom of expression.<sup>8</sup> In order to examine the validity of these contentions, I use media publications about patriotic education, from reports about exact “patriotic” events to investigations of the financial side of “services for the rising of love for the Fatherland” (“услуг по воспитанию любви к Отчизне”).<sup>9</sup> The extensive campaign of “patriotic education” in Russia deserves much more attention than it has received. This became especially clear on 24 February 2022.

### **“To Use Spiritual Potential in Order to Preserve the Continuity of Glorious Combat Traditions”. State Programmes of Patriotic Education**

Youth has always been at the centre of militarized educational practices in twentieth- and twenty-first century Russia and the USSR.<sup>10</sup> Sergey Oushakine sees the roots of the militarization of youth and "pedagogical fantasies of war-oriented patriotism" in the militarized communes and colonies of the late 1920s and early 1930s associated with the famous Soviet educator Anton Makarenko. According to Oushakine, back then a militarized daily routine and a strong emphasis on uniform were used as a way of providing homeless, abandoned, and often criminal children with a definite performative backbone.<sup>11</sup>

Political scientist Valerie Sperling links the modern approach toward patriotic education with Soviet militarized patriotism, linking it to the enormous propaganda campaign of the late 1930s focused on the need to prepare for a future inevitable war with capitalist states, and the perceived

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<sup>8</sup> D.W. Blum, “Official Patriotism in Russia. Its Essence and Implications”, *PONARS Policy Memo* No. 420 2006. <<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/official-patriotism-in-russia-its-essence-and-implications/>>, accessed 26 April 2022.

<sup>9</sup> C. Ezhov, “Brat'ya po grantam. Kak Boevoe bratstvo vypolnyaet goszakaz na patriotism”, *Sobesednik*, 8 November 2018. <<https://sobesednik.ru/politika/20181108-bratya-po-grantam-kak-boevoe-bratstvo-vypolnyaet-goszakaz-na-patriotizm>>, accessed 29 April 2022.

<sup>10</sup> About educational practices relating to patriotism in Imperial Russia see, for example, R. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy from Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas II*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. About such practices in the Soviet Union, O. Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941-1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> S. Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009, p. 189.

need to have a youth population eager and ready to defend the state. Due to this, the Soviet population underwent a thoroughgoing series of military-patriotic education initiatives aimed at "Soviet youth". Sperling argues that, as well as the period before World War II, they were especially intensive after 1970, when the state felt the necessity to make citizens more loyal and consolidated.<sup>12</sup>

In the same time, the use of veterans for patriotic education started as early as 1960, and was active throughout the Brezhnev period. According to Lucy Dunlop, Soviet authorities in general and the Komsomol in particular were by that time more than keen to involve veterans and have them tell their stories as part of the patriotic education programme for young people. In marked contrast to the future-oriented discourse of the early Soviet period, propaganda of the Brezhnev era involved a great deal of looking back along the 'roads of glory trodden by our fathers and grandfathers', with constant admonitions to children and youth to prove themselves worthy of the heroic older generation. Veterans of war were wheeled out for all sorts of public occasions: to give talks in schools, to assist at Soviet rites of passage such as entry into the Pioneers and Komsomol, school leaving ceremonies and entry into a new work collective.<sup>13</sup> Exactly as in the 2010s, Great Patriotic War veterans tended to receive positive coverage only if they continued to contribute to society by engagement in some kind of socially useful work like training up a new generation of patriots dedicated to the cause of the Soviet people.<sup>14</sup>

The attitude towards patriotic education started changing only during perestroika. The wide-ranging reforms of school education during this time and later in Yeltsin's period as leader of the new Russian state were associated with a transformation of the institutional and ideological character of *vospitanie* (the public socialization of children). The children's Communist movement (Pioneers, Young Communist League) became increasingly irrelevant under Gorbachev and then lost their relevance completely after Russia became a multi-party state. Communist ideology had

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<sup>12</sup> Sperling, "Making the Public Patriotic", p. 220.

<sup>13</sup> L. Dunlop, *Discourses of Heroism in Brezhnev's USSR*, DPhil thesis, Oxford University, Oxford, 2017, p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

vanished from the schoolroom; the emphasis was now on the modernization and liberalization of school education (for instance, compulsory textbooks disappeared and the content of extra-curricular activities was largely in the hands of individual schools and teachers). The state lost its monopoly on school education and out-of-school activities for children, and the latter were mainly associated with leisure activities of the kind that had been increasingly important in the Pioneer movement during the Brezhnev years also<sup>15</sup>. However, soon after Vladimir Putin came to power, a major revival of attention to the system of “patriotic education” of Russian citizens began, and quickly became a continuous trend. While this important political shift has attracted some attention from commentators, particularly political scientists, the discussion has not paid close attention to the detail of the programmes and has simplified the reasons for their emergence. Accordingly, I shall briefly revisit those two questions here.

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The first State Programme, “Patriotic Education of the Citizens of the Russian Federation (2001-2005)”, was established by the Russian government in February 2001. The main goal of the programme was *“на основе формирования патриотических чувств и сознания обеспечить решение задач по консолидации общества, поддержанию общественной и экономической стабильности, упрочению единства и дружбы народов Российской Федерации”*.<sup>16</sup> To achieve this goal, the programmes should foster *“формирование у граждан Российской Федерации духовно-патриотических ценностей, профессиональных качеств и умений, чувства верности конституционному и воинскому долгу, а также готовности к их проявлению в различных сферах жизни общества, особенно в процессе военной и государственной службы”*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See about this: Y. Krawatzek, “The Soviet Union during Perestroika: Youth amidst Authoritarian Regime Breakdown”, *Youth in Regime Crisis: Comparative Perspectives from Russia to Weimar Germany*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018; L. Dunlop, *Discourses of heroism in Brezhnev's USSR* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2017.)

<sup>16</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii na 2001-2005 gg.* <<http://base.garant.ru/1584972>>, accessed 12 May 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

New programmes of patriotic education have been issued every five years (the periodization also harks back to the Soviet period and *pyatiletki*). The basic principles have remained unchanged, but the goals and priorities of patriotic education have been modified all the time, alongside changes in the state politics. As Douglas Blum pointed out, the programme can be used as an insight into the dominant discourse in Russian political life, which is distinguished by the connections it draws between social order, spirituality, a seamless national history, and the primacy of the state.<sup>18</sup>

The crucial feature of the first programme (as well as the next ones) was its militaristic character. The list of activities aimed at generating a rise in the level of patriotism included public celebrations of victories of the Russian army (including those of the pre-revolutionary period), paramilitary training camps for children and adolescents; school military lessons and meetings with war veterans; campaigns to discover Second World War burial places; publication of biographies of famous military commanders. For example, the love of the Motherland, according to the state programme, should be fostered by the celebration of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian prison system in 2004, or the conference “The Fatherland. The Army. The Church” («Отечество. Армия. Церковь»), held in Moscow in 2003. Some of these activities, particularly those related to the Second World War, echoed work with children in the Soviet period, but others (e.g. the prison system anniversary) were new.

As Anatoli Rapoport noted, the fact that militarism was already considered an inseparable component of patriotic education (“The phrase that commonly was used in the Soviet Union for patriotic education was military-patriotic education”) ensured the smooth integration of the programmes. The military rationale of the patriotic education campaign did not need to be explicitly explained or clarified; the mutually shared codes “patriotism” or “patriotic education” were normally decoded “correctly” by educators (even if some of them could have opposed

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<sup>18</sup> Blum, “Official Patriotism in Russia”, p. 3.

them).<sup>19</sup> Constructing a continuity between present and past in terms of the unquestioned integration of military values into socialization strategies was an elementary exercise.

What prompted the Russian government to establish such an expensive programme exactly at the beginning of the 2000s? The explanation in the document itself was very brief: *“Экономическая дезинтеграция, социальная дифференциация общества, девальвация духовных ценностей оказали негативное влияние на общественное сознание. (...) В общественном сознании получили широкое распространение равнодушие, эгоизм, индивидуализм, цинизм, немотивированная агрессивность, неуважительное отношение к государству и социальным институтам. Проявляется устойчивая тенденция падения престижа военной и государственной службы.”*<sup>20</sup>

According to Vladimir Putin, patriotism, traditions and cultural memory were the only things that were able to unite Russia. Announcing the first patriotic programme, he claimed that *“не нужно специально искать национальную идею. Она сама уже вызревает в нашем обществе.”*<sup>21</sup>

There certainly were other unmentioned background factors of establishing the programme. Valerie Sperling offers the most obvious explanation: the new government decided to inculcate the patriotic sentiment that had been diminished during the 1990s in order to increase the number of Russian youth willing to serve in the army.<sup>22</sup> The promotion of patriotism became the central idea of the whole presidency of Vladimir Putin. Sperling reminds us how, at the very beginning of his presidency, in October 2000, Putin reflected on Russia’s “basic values” and defined them as “patriotism, love of one’s motherland, one’s home, and one’s people, religious and cultural values – everything that forms the foundation of our life”. Sperling rightly asserts that despite Putin did

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<sup>19</sup> A. Rapoport, “Patriotic Education in Russia: Stylistic move or the Sign of Substantive Counter-Reform?” *The Educational Forum*, 73(2), 2009, p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> Pravitel’stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii na 2001-2005 gg.* <<http://base.garant.ru/1584972>>, accessed 12 May 2022.

<sup>21</sup> V. Putin, *Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 2000. <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21480>>, accessed 12 July 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Sperling, “Making the Public Patriotic”, p. 226.

not mention the military in that speech, it became the common denominator between Soviet and Russian patriotism.<sup>23</sup> I claim that soon, right at the beginning of the 2000s, the government turned to the long-established Soviet tradition of militarizing official rhetoric and appealing to the combat experience in the educational process.

Douglas Blum takes a broader view and claims that the appeal to militarized patriotism meant not only the enhancement of traditional military power but also an attempt to promote a thoroughgoing reconstruction and reinvigoration of national identity.<sup>24</sup>

While I agree with these two perspectives, which continued to be valid later on also, I would argue that there were other equally important factors of a deeper social kind in play. One of them was the legacy of the recent local conflicts. Many victims of the first Chechen war were not yet mourned and buried (in 2000-2001 alone, the organization Human Rights Watch found eight burial places of unidentified Russian soldiers),<sup>25</sup> yet the second military campaign in Chechnya had already begun.

A further important element was raising political and social anxiety about the perceived threat from Islamic radicalism, which was spreading from the North Caucasus to other parts of Russia. A series of terrorist attacks in Moscow and other Russian cities sharpened the sense of threat. Added to this, the level of crime and drug addiction remained high, and society struggled with feelings of insecurity. In 1999-2000 the polls detected an unexpectedly high level of nationalism, and new strongly nationalistic movements started to emerge.<sup>26</sup> During a press conference in 1999, Vladimir Putin was asked about the bombing of Grozny and replied that the terrorists would be mercilessly pursued and killed. The President permitted himself an emotional expression about

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<sup>23</sup>Sperling, "The Last Refuge of a Scoundrel", p. 249.

<sup>24</sup> Blum, "Official Patriotism in Russia", p.1.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example "The 'Dirty War' In Chechnya: Forced Disappearances, Torture, and Summary Executions, *Human Rights Watch*, March 2001. <[www.hrw.org/reports/2001/chechnya/index.htm?](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/chechnya/index.htm?)>, accessed 12 May 2022.

<sup>26</sup> About the history of Russian nationalistic movements see, for example, A. Verkhovskii, "Russkii farsh. Kak poyavilis' I kuda idut rossiiskie natsionalisty", *Lenta.ru*, 20 April 2016. <<https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/04/20/nationalism/>>, accessed 20 July 2019..

“rubbing out terrorists in the latrines”: *“Если мы их в туалете поймает, то, извините, и в сортире их замочим”* which indicated that anti-Chechen violence had become legitimate.<sup>27</sup>

Malaise within the armed forces was also widespread. The army (still consisting mostly of conscripts) was in deep crisis. According to the Ministry of Defence, the number of conscripts had decreased from 27% in 1994 to 9.5% in 2004 – the lowest figures in the whole history of the Russian and Soviet army.<sup>28</sup> Conditions among active servicemen were also a serious problem. The level of bullying (*“дедовщина”*) was exceptionally high, and so was the rate of draft evasion. The status of the military as a social group was constantly dropping. In 1998, a poll of the independent sociological Levada Centre showed that 84% of Russian citizens did not want their relatives to serve in the army. In 2002 the same answer was given by 72% of respondents.<sup>29</sup>

Under these circumstances, the appearance of a programme that was aimed at *“консолидация общества, поддержание общественной и экономической стабильности, упрочение единства и дружбы народов”*<sup>30</sup> looked very ambitious in terms of implementation, but at the very least conveyed to the post-Soviet public that the government was concerned about social anomie and determined to take radical steps to address this.

The creation of the programme was one of the first attempts of the new Russian government to unite citizens around sources of patriotic pride, to reconstruct national identity and to create a new state ideology that would fill the space left by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Communist rhetoric, and to protect this space from being filled up by other, independent nongovernmental agents. As Anatoli Rapoport argues, the creation of the programme was aimed at replacing the half-hearted liberal reforms of the 1990s by patriotic sentiments.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The video from the press-conference can be found on YouTube <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2f-Q4K\\_J70](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2f-Q4K_J70)>, accessed 21 May 2022.

<sup>28</sup> “Genshtab rezko - v 2-2,5 raza – uvelichivaet kolichestvo prizyvnikov”, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 22 July 2004. <[http://www.ng.ru/politics/2004-07-22/1\\_genshtab.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2004-07-22/1_genshtab.html)>, accessed 4 July 2019.

<sup>29</sup> “Rossiyane ne khotyat, chtoby ikh blizkikh prizyvali v armiyu”, Levada Centre, 21-24 January 2005. <<http://www.levada.ru/2005/02/08/rossiyane-ne-hotyat-chtoby-ih-blizkih-prizyvali-v-armiyu/>>, accessed 16 June 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2001-2005 gg.*

<sup>31</sup> Rapoport, “Patriotic Education in Russia”, p. 147.

In 2004, shortly after the establishment of the programme, an opinion poll showed that 89% of respondents agreed with the necessity of paying greater attention to the patriotic education of youth, and 62% were nostalgic about the Soviet system of patriotic education and wanted it to return.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore reasonable to presume that the interest in establishing the new concept of patriotism came not just from the authorities, but from the public, which was also acutely aware of the gap in state ideology.

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Initially, the creation of patriots was not ranked as a high priority from the budgetary point of view. The declared amount of funding for the first programme was 177.95 million rubles from the federal and regional budgets<sup>33</sup> (which was approximately equal to the annual budget of the remote and marginal Belgorod region at that time).<sup>34</sup>

However, soon the programmes were positioned as affairs of state importance. In 15 years, their budget increased 10 times, almost doubling every five years (none of the Russian regions had received such an increase in financing). The programme of 2006-2010 had a budget of 497.8 million rubles;<sup>35</sup> in 2011-2015 it was already 777.2 million rubles.<sup>36</sup> The main increase occurred in 2015, after the beginning of the military campaign in Eastern Ukraine and the Russian involvement in the Syrian war. The programme 2016-2020 obtained a budget of 1,6 trillion,<sup>37</sup> an amount approximately equal to the annual budget of the city of Moscow in the same period.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "Patrioticheskoe vospitanie", Baza dannykh Fonda obshchestvennoe mnenie, 5 February 2004. <[https://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/power/pow\\_arm/dd040530](https://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/power/pow_arm/dd040530)>, accessed 14 July 2019. This poll was conducted by an organization, closely affiliated with the state, so the results of it should not be fully trusted. Although, they look very plausible.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> O federal'nom byudzheta 2000 god, 1999. <<http://docs.cntd.ru/document/901751145>>, accessed 1 July 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsiina 2006-2010 gg.* <<http://base.garant.ru/188373>>, accessed 20 July 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsii na 2011-2015 gg.* <[http://archives.ru/programs/patriot\\_2015.shtml](http://archives.ru/programs/patriot_2015.shtml)>, accessed 20 July 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie grazhdan Rossiiskoi Federatsiina 2016-2020 gg.* <[http://ivo.garant.ru/#/document/71296398/http://archives.ru/programs/patriot\\_2015.shtml](http://ivo.garant.ru/#/document/71296398/http://archives.ru/programs/patriot_2015.shtml)>, accessed 20 July 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Byudzheta Moskvy <[https://budget.mos.ru/budget\\_proj](https://budget.mos.ru/budget_proj)>, accessed 7 July 2019.

The second Programme (2006-2010) mainly repeated the first one, but also claimed that the system of patriotic education had now “generally emerged”, and had “*позволила добиться некоторого изменения тональности ряда электронных и печатных средств массовой информации и в освещении проблем патриотического воспитания*”. However, the programme admitted that “*патриотизм еще не стал в полной мере объединяющей основой общества.*”<sup>39</sup>

The level of militarization of the programmes was rising gradually. The third one already had a new goal – establishment of a positive attitude to military service: “*формирование позитивного отношения общества к военной службе и положительной мотивации у молодых людей относительно прохождения военной службы по контракту и по призыву*”.<sup>40</sup> Among the events listed in the programme, several new activities appeared, e.g. commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Soviet troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan (this event had to “inculcate a feeling of respect for participants in those events”) and the tenth anniversary of the heroic feat of the Sixth Company that had perished in the Chechen Republic.<sup>41</sup>

By the mid-2000s, the state budget for military activities had increased still further, and new youth military-patriotic clubs started to emerge. In 2005 the Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement “Наши” (“Ours”) was established; in 2008 The Federal Agency for Youth Affairs (Росмолодежь) appeared. Both of them quickly became some of the main contractors of the new federal programmes. In 2009 the Voluntary Society of Cooperation with the Army, Air Force and Navy (known by its Russian acronym DOSAAF), a famous Soviet military organization, preparing high school students for the army, was re-established and quickly reached approximately 10,000 branches, covering almost all of Russia’s regions.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Pravitel’stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2006-2010 gg.*

<sup>40</sup> Pravitel’stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitaniya 2011-2015 gg.*

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. I write about the myth of the Six Company in Chapter 2.

<sup>42</sup> I. Rozhdestvensky, “Russia’s Littlest Soldiers: How the Government Teaches Kids to Love the Motherland and to Fight for It”, *Meduza*, 16 July 2015, <<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2015/07/16/russia-s-littlest-soldiers>>, accessed 13 July 2019.



**Figure 3.** Rally Our Victory (“Наша победа”) organized by the then just founded “Наши” movement in May 2005.<sup>43</sup> The rally gathered 60,000 young people and 1,000 veterans of the GPW. In his speech, the head of the movement claimed that the new generation was taking the country from the veterans and swore that no new invaders or neo-fascists would enter the country. One of the GPW veterans wished that girls gathered at the rally might give birth to at least four children, and that boys should be ready to protect the Motherland.<sup>44</sup>

In the early 2010s, after the adoption of the third Programme of Patriotic Education, the importance of patriotism as an ideological concept grew still further, and became one of the key concepts of Russian state rhetoric. In 2012, in his annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin stated that he saw patriotism as a “consolidating policy base”. In a talk with the leaders of various patriotic groups, he also claimed that to talk about the patriotic education of youth means to talk about the most important things: *“о ценностях, о нравственных основах, на которыхмы можем и должны строить нашу жизнь, воспитывать детей,*

<sup>43</sup> . The photo was made by Kommersant newspaper, published here <<https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/02/25/nashi10years/?t>> , accessed 22.05.2022.

<sup>44</sup> Yu. Suprunenko, "Veterany – molodym: 'Segodnya my peredaem vam Rossiyu...'", *Yoki.ru*, 16 May 2005. <<https://www.yoki.ru/social/16-05-2005/1464-nashi-0/?ysclid=13ho6qusau>>, accessed 22.05.2022.

*развивать общество, в конечном итоге укреплять нашу страну. [...] Нам нужны действительно живые формы работы по воспитанию патриотизма и гражданственности, а значит, опирающиеся на общественную инициативу, на служение традиционных религий, на деятельность молодёжных и военно-патриотических организаций.*<sup>45</sup>

The fourth programme (2016-2020) is characterized by an even greater amount of paramilitary events and even more militarized concept of patriotism.<sup>46</sup> For the first time since the implementation of the programmes, patriotism was given a definition; it was “readiness for a future war”. The programme notes the need to increase the motivation of young people to serve the Fatherland; strengthen the prestige of the armed forces’ service; improve the practice of patronage of military units over educational organizations; to shape the moral, psychological and physical readiness of young people to defend the Fatherland, loyalty to the constitutional and military duty in peacetime and wartime.<sup>47</sup> It is important to note that wartime is mentioned in the programmes for the first time. The programme does not mention the Russian military campaign in Syria but points out the tension with the West: the establishment of the Russian patriotic consciousness is happening “*в сложных условиях экономического и геополитического соперничества.*”<sup>48</sup> Sociologist Iskander Yasaveev notes that the programme 2016-2020, unlike the previous, does not mention labour activity and labour in general.<sup>49</sup> Service to the motherland can only be performed with a gun.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Vstrecha s predstaviteleyami obshchestvennosti po voprosam patrioticheskogo vospitaniya molodezhi, 2012. <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16470>>, accessed 24 May 2019.

<sup>46</sup> The only value-building entity that can compare with the military is “traditional religions”, which primarily refers to Russian Orthodoxy.

<sup>47</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitaniya 2016-2020 gg.*

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> I.G. Yasaveev, "Leitmotivy vlastnoi ritoriki v otnoshenii rossiiskoi molodezhi", *Sotsiologicheskoe obozrenie*, vol. 15, no.3, 2016, pp. 56.

<sup>50</sup> The 2016-2020 Programme was not replaced by a new one. Instead, in 2021, the federal project Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation an integral part of the state project “Education”, was implemented in Russia. Unfortunately, a detailed description of the new project has not been published but from the published brief draft bill it seems that it continues the same line of thought.

Obviously, the main subject of the patriots' production was the state. The state was also their sponsor. Besides the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, its main agents in the implementation of the programme were the Ministry of Defence and the Russian State Military Historical and Cultural Centre under the Government of the Russian Federation.<sup>51</sup> Regional authorities were required to develop their own local programmes, based on the federal one.

All of the four documents were aimed at encompassing all organizations that can exercise influence on Russian citizens of all ages, from government agencies to schools, NGOs, religious denominations (above all Orthodoxy), Russian Cossack communities:<sup>52</sup> *“Создание такой системы предполагает консолидацию деятельности органов государственной власти всех уровней, научных и образовательных учреждений, ветеранских, молодежных, других общественных и религиозных организаций”*<sup>53</sup>

As sociologists Ekaterina Khodzhaeva and Irina Meyer point out, against the backdrop of a general ideological confrontation with the West, patriotic education appears as a matter in which only trusted organizations loyal to the Russian authorities should be involved. Thus, in 2016, a bill on amendments to the federal law “On Public Organizations” was introduced to the State Duma prohibiting organizations involved in “patriotic education” from receiving foreign funding.<sup>54</sup>

Veterans' unions were considered perfectly loyal and trustworthy. They were involved in the fulfilment of the state programmes from the very beginning and had to play a crucial part in it. In the very first programme, the participation of veterans' alliances was mentioned several times.

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<sup>51</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2001-2005 gg.*

<sup>52</sup> Under Cossacks in official documents are meant not Cossacks in the ethnic sense but a militias in approximations of Cossack uniform. Laruelle estimates Cossack troops working under the state umbrella represent about 100,000 people (M. Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021, p. 154.) Since the 2000s, Cossacks have been used for policing oppositional activities, e.g. supposedly blasphemous exhibitions and performances. According to evidences of journalists, Cossacks militias served alongside the Russian military during the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, the takeover of Crimea and in military actions in Ukrainian Donbass in 2014 (See about it for example S. Shuster, “Meet the Cossack 'Wolves' Doing Russia's Dirty Work in Ukraine”, *The Time*, 12 May 2014. <<https://time.com/95898/wolves-hundred-ukraine-russia-cossack/>>, accessed 22 May 2022.)

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> E, Khodzhaeva, I. Meyer, “Mobilizing Patriotism in Russia: Federal Programs of Patriotic Education”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 207, 2017. <<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000200136>, accessed 15 July 2019.

They had to be involved in the work with young people for the sake of “*полнее использовать их опыт и духовный потенциал в целях сохранения и преемственности славных боевых и трудовых традиций.*”<sup>55</sup> In the next programme (2006-2010), it was emphasized that this work had been successful, and the activities of veteran organizations were termed precise and fit for purpose.<sup>56</sup>

At the end of the 2010s, the demand for the participation of veterans in patriotic education began to grow, and the argument about the need to increase the activity of veteran alliances in working with young people was repeated several times in the programme for 2016–2020. The new motives of propaganda of military service and the raising of its prestige (“*укрепление престижа службы в Вооруженных Силах Российской Федерации и правоохранительных органах*”) have merged.<sup>57</sup>

It is important to note that none of the four documents mentions the association of veterans of a particular war. It thus supports my hypothesis<sup>58</sup> that the state placed the veterans in the same category, seeing those who fought in Afghanistan as younger brothers of those who fought in World War II and defiantly not distinguishing their achievements.

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All four Programmes (2001–2020) stated that their audience was “*все социальные и возрастные группы и семьи как основные ячейки общества*”.<sup>59</sup> However, most of the activities listed in the documents had children and adolescents as the main audience. The first and fourth of the programmes indicated that the work of veterans was expected to be aimed primarily at young people. Veterans’ organizations also named youth as their primary target. This bears out the contention of sociologist Elena Omelchenko, who has argued that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the abrupt changes in the socio-political climate, the discursive practices of producing

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<sup>55</sup> Pravitel’stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2001-2005 gg.*

<sup>56</sup> Pravitel’stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2006-2010 gg.*

<sup>57</sup> Pravitel’stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2016-2020 gg.*

<sup>58</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>59</sup> Pravitel’stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2001-2005 gg.*

patriotic sentiments began to focus on young people again.<sup>60</sup> Omelchenko calls this process “the objectification and unification of youth as a group that needs to be controlled, regulated and morally retrieved” (“*объективация и унификация молодежи, как группы, нуждающейся в контроле, регулировании и моральном исправлении*”)<sup>61</sup> According to her, one can use information about patriotic innovations (the creation of new political organizations for young people, new public holidays, the commercialization of patriotic feeling) as a lens for perceiving how the authorities are trying to rebuild the nation and transform its inhabitants from “Soviet people” into Russians.<sup>62</sup> In what follows, I shall apply this insight to the special case of veterans.

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The outcomes of the implementation of the programme sound ambitious and involve all spheres of life: from the "socio-ideological front", where the programme should "*обеспечить духовно-нравственное единство общества, снижение степени идеологического противостояния*": to socio-economic relations, where it should contribute to the development of the national economy; and to the realm of defence capability, where the programme should provoke the desire of young people to serve in the armed forces, the readiness of citizens to defend the Fatherland and "*сохранять и развивать его славные боевые и трудовые традиции*".<sup>63</sup> Sociologists Ekaterina Khodzhaeva and Irina Meyer claim that the programmes formulated virtually immeasurable indicators that reflected the process of the programmes' implementation rather than their result. Their effectiveness was unclear. Hence, it could be easily simulated and even falsified.<sup>64</sup> However, the programme 2016-2020 claims that since 2001 the total number of patriotic associations and clubs in the country has reached 22,000, defence and sports camps – approximately 2,000, youth training centres for military service had been established in 78 regions of the Russian Federation (out of 85), and in total 21.6% of Russian youth had already participated

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<sup>60</sup> Omel'chenko, “Kak nauchit' lyubit' Rodinu?”, p. 270.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2001-2005 gg.*

<sup>64</sup> Khodzhaeva, Meyer, “Mobilizing Patriotism in Russia”.

in the patriotic education events.<sup>65</sup> While not representing anything like a majority of the intended age group, this is a substantial proportion of it and clearly the intention is to broaden the catchment still further.



**Figure 4.** Members of Yunarmiya practice assembling rifles at the Youth Pre-Recruitment training center in the city of Noginsk in Moscow region.<sup>66</sup>

### **“From a Position of Responsibility for the Future of Russia”.**

#### **The Involvement of Veterans’ Unions in the State Programmes**

How have the veterans’ unions reacted to the new tasks and how did the implementation of the programmes influence them? In what follows, I propose to study the development of several well known and influential veterans’ alliances that have been actively involved in the patriotic education programmes: the Russian Alliance of Veterans of Afghanistan (Российский Союз Ветеранов Афганистана, RSVA), and The All-Russia Public Organization of Veterans Battle

<sup>65</sup> Pravitel’stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitaniya 2016-2020 gg.*

<sup>66</sup> The photograph by Sergey Ponomarev was initially published at A. Troianovski, I. Nechepurenko, V. Hopkins, “How the Kremlin Is Militarizing Russian Society”, *The New York Times*, 21 December 2021. <[www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/world/europe/russia-military-putin-kremlin.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/world/europe/russia-military-putin-kremlin.html)>, accessed 23 May 2022.

Brotherhood (“Боевое братство”). These are among the most colourful, significant and in the same time characteristic examples of such organizations. I intend to consider the changes that the veterans’ unions went through after the adoption of the state patriotic programmes, and to trace how the participation in the state initiatives has become one of the main forms of the unions’ activities.

*“В чем главный итог нашей 20-летней деятельности? (...) Мы стали реальными партнерами государства, способными полноценно работать вместе с ним ради защиты национальных интересов”.*<sup>67</sup> This is a verbatim quotation from the speech of the chairman of the All-Russia Public Organization of Veterans, Battle Brotherhood, Boris Gromov, at a meeting of the union’s Central Council in December 2017. The Battle Brotherhood is one of the largest and most influential Russian veterans’ organizations. According to official information, it has more than 105,000 members from across the Russian regions.<sup>68</sup> If this figure is correct, it means that, given overall numbers of 750,000,<sup>69</sup> almost one in every seven former Afghan soldiers is a member.

In 1987-1989, the chairman of the union, Boris Gromov, was the head of the 40<sup>th</sup> Army – the entire contingent of Soviet troops in Afghanistan – and later he had a political career which included the post of the Deputy Minister of Defence (1992-1995) and, more unusually for a military veteran, the governor of Moscow region (2000-2012). According to him, the organization has involved *"подавляющее большинство ветеранов боевых действий в Афганистане в*

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<sup>67</sup> Boris Gromov: Boevoe bratstvo stalo real'nym partnerom gosudarstva v zashchite natsional'nykh interesov, Antimaidan.ru, 22. December 2017, <<https://antimaidan.ru/article/12346>>, accessed 15 July 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Privetstvie k uchastnikam V S"ezda Vserossiisko i obshchestvennoi organizatsii veteranov Boevoe Bratstvo ot Prezidenta Rossii, Boevoe bratstvo website. <<https://bbratstvo.com/organizatsii/dokumenty-organizatsii/materialy-5-sezda-organizatsii/privetstviya-k-uchastnikam-v-sezda-vserossijskoj-obshhestvennoj-organizatsii-veteranov-boevoe-bratstvo/14271-2>>, accessed 15 July 2019.

<sup>69</sup> For the number of Russian militaries in Afghanistan, see <<https://bbratstvo.com/2018/02/24/doklad-borisa-gromova-na-zasedanii-komiteta-po-koordinacii-sovmestnoy-deyatelnosti-veteranskih-obedineniy>>, accessed 15 July 2019.

*активную общественно-политическую и патриотическую жизнь", its members "участвуют в реализации 25-ти своих проектов, ежемесячно проводят до 1500 мероприятий."*<sup>70</sup>

Battle Brotherhood was established in 1997. If the original aim of the organization, as well as other military unions of that time, was to mourn the fallen and help families of the victims, in the beginning of the 2000s the union claimed a new aim: to increase the social and political activity of veterans, the effectiveness of their participation in military-patriotic work, and the preparation of young people for the defence of the Fatherland.<sup>71</sup> The organization explained these changes referring to the changes in socio-economic situation in Russia, the strengthening of its geopolitical position and the growth of the new threats to national security.<sup>72</sup> In other words, it gave an account of causality that closely resembled the rationale for the transformation of government campaigns.

The final shift from the discourse of grief to the discourse of glory occurred at the fourth congress of Battle Brotherhood in January 2011 (after the release of the third Programme of patriotic education) when the organization finally abandoned commemorative and social work, and switched from *"узковетеранской социальной проблематики"* to activities that, in its approach, were *"значимы для широких слоев российского общества, таких как патриотизм, сплочение их вокруг национальной идеи содействия развитию России как сильного социального государства"*.<sup>73</sup> From now on its main goal was to protect not the veterans, but Russia's national interests.<sup>74</sup>

Tellingly, in 2007, when Battle Brotherhood began to reduce all activities not directly related to patriotic work and created a branch organization The All-Russian Association of the Families of the Fallen Defenders of the Fatherland (*"Общероссийская общественная организация семей"*

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<sup>70</sup> "Doklad Predsedatelya Komiteta po koordinatsii sovmestnykh deistvii veteranskikh obedinenii Geroya Sovetskogo Soyuza Gromova B.V.", Bоевое bratstvo website. <<https://bbratstvo.com/doklad-predsedatelya-komiteta-po-koordinatsii-sovmestnykh-deystviy-veteranskikh-obedineniy-geroya-sovetskogo-soyuza-gromova-bv>>, accessed 1 July 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Istoricheskaya spravka, Bоевое bratstvo website <<https://bbratstvo.com/organizatsii/istoricheskaya-spravka>>, accessed 3 July 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> I address this topic in Chapter 1.

погибших защитников Отечества”). This alliance, which now has 33 offices throughout the country,<sup>75</sup> was supposed to assist families of fallen soldiers and participate in the elaboration of the federal law regarding their status. In reality, the association has been used for involving relatives of the dead soldiers in the same “patriotic” activities. In June 2019 alone, they took part in the festival of the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service in Chelyabinsk region;<sup>76</sup> presented awards to members of the state youth organization “*Юнармия*” [Young Army] (“for their help in holding the patriotic events”) in Vladikavkaz;<sup>77</sup> held a meeting with the students of the North Caucasian Military School<sup>78</sup> and were present at the opening ceremony of the military-patriotic game “Я – патриот” in the Krasnoyarsk State University.<sup>79</sup>

Organizations that, in theory, should have been independent, in practice turned out to be subordinate to the main military alliances. For example, the head of the Bryansk branch of the organization, Maria, the widow of an officer who died in Afghanistan, refused to talk to me until she was given an order to do so by the head of the local military union. She began the interview by saying that her organization is grateful to the head of the union and the local city administration.

2005 also saw the start of the process of merging of small regional veterans’ alliances and Battle Brotherhood. Various military unions from the former USSR (for example, The Public Association of Afghanistan Veterans of Azerbaijan or The Association of Soldiers-Veterans of Uzbekistan) also became members of the Battle Brotherhood. The membership in the All-Russian organization gave then new (federal) funding and new statute. Its first paragraph stated that that the unions must participate in protecting national interests in accordance with the law of the

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<sup>75</sup> See the website of the organization, [www.ooospzo.com/deyatelnost](http://www.ooospzo.com/deyatelnost)

<sup>76</sup> <[www.ooospzo.com/single-post/2019/06/20/Массовое-культурно-спортивное-мероприятие-прошло-на-ведомственной-базе-отдыха-«Искра»-расположенной-на-озере-Кум-Куль](http://www.ooospzo.com/single-post/2019/06/20/Массовое-культурно-спортивное-мероприятие-прошло-на-ведомственной-базе-отдыха-«Искра»-расположенной-на-озере-Кум-Куль)>, accessed 15 July 2019.

<sup>77</sup> <[www.ooospzo.com/single-post/2019/06/20/Мать-Героя-России-наградила-юнармейцев-грамотами-и-благодарственными-письмами](http://www.ooospzo.com/single-post/2019/06/20/Мать-Героя-России-наградила-юнармейцев-грамотами-и-благодарственными-письмами)>, accessed 15 July 2019.

<sup>78</sup> <[www.ooospzo.com/single-post/2019/06/12/Встреча-с-мамой-Героя-России](http://www.ooospzo.com/single-post/2019/06/12/Встреча-с-мамой-Героя-России)>, accessed 15 July 2019.

<sup>79</sup> <[www.ooospzo.com/single-post/2019/06/03/В-Красноярском-Сибирском-Федеральном-Университете-состоялась-военно-патриотическая-игра-имени-Героя-России-Олега-Тибеккина-«Я-патриот»](http://www.ooospzo.com/single-post/2019/06/03/В-Красноярском-Сибирском-Федеральном-Университете-состоялась-военно-патриотическая-игра-имени-Героя-России-Олега-Тибеккина-«Я-патриот»)>, accessed 15 July 2019.

Russian Federation, and only the second one claimed the protection of war veterans and their families.<sup>80</sup> By 2011, the consolidation of the union was declared complete. According to its website, “полнокровные, дееспособные, авторитетные и узнаваемые в обществе”<sup>81</sup> regional branches had emerged in all 85 Russian regions. In total, the organization now had 951 local and 623 primary branches. The next step began: Battle Brotherhood initiated the creation of a new “эффе́ктивного обновленного института общества, ассоциированного в общую систему участия в обеспечении национальной безопасности России”.<sup>82</sup>

Like most of the organizations involved in patriotic education and affiliated with the state, the union has secured extensive funding through the state grant system. The amount of grants that the alliance received has been steadily increasing. In 2015, it obtained 13 million rubles, in 2017—24 million,<sup>83</sup> in 2018—51 millions.<sup>84</sup> This stands alongside a crackdown on NGOs that are allegedly receiving funding from foreign sources, which had more and more difficulty operating over the given period.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ustav Vserossiisko i obshchestvennoi organizatsii veteranov Boevoe bratstvo, Boevoe bratstvo website. <<https://bbratstvo.com/ob-organizatsii/dokumenty-organizatsii/ustav-vserossijskoj-obshhestvennoj-organizatsii-veteranov-boevoe-bratstvo-redaktsiya-do-14-iyunya-2016-g>>, accessed 16 June 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Istoriches kayaspravka, Boevoe bratstvo website.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> “Prezident podderzhal patriotov materialno. Kremlevskie granty poluchat ‘Boevoe bratstvo’, ‘Russkie mototsiklisty’ i molodezh’ Edinoi Rossii”, *Vedomosti*, 23 November 2017. <[www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/11/23/742766-prezident-patriotov](http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/11/23/742766-prezident-patriotov)>, accessed 1 July 2019.

<sup>84</sup> S.Ezhov, “Brat’ya po grantam. Kak Boevoe bratstvo vpolnyaet goszakaz na patriotism”, *Sobesednik*, 8 November 2018, <<https://sobesednik.ru/politika/20181108-bratya-po-grantam-kak-boevoe-bratstvo-vpolnyaet-goszakaz-na-patriotizm>>, accessed 1 July 2019.

<sup>85</sup> In 2012, Russia passed a law on “foreign agents”, under which the work of non-profit organizations that receive foreign funding and are engaged in political activities (interpreted very broadly) become subjects to numerous restrictions. They must state their status on all printed materials; report their income and expenses to the governmental authorities, and can be fined or shut down for violating these rules. In recent years, all prominent Russian NGOs, including the Memorial Human Rights Centre, the Centre of Independent Sociological Research, the Levada Centre and others, as well as more than 40 mass media, have come under this law. 16 of the “foreign agents” were closed by courts, and 56 were forced to stop their activities themselves. Since 2020, the law has been expanded to individuals. See about the law, for example, M. Russell, “Foreign agents’ and ‘undesirables’ Russian civil society in danger of extinction?”, *European Parliamentary Research Service*, March 2022. <[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)729297](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)729297)>, accessed 22 May 2022.

The Fifth Congress of the renewed Battle Brotherhood in 2016 became a milestone for the new state institution. It took place in the Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War on Poklonnaya Gora Memorial Complex — the most important site of memory<sup>86</sup> of the Second World War in Russia. The congress was opened by a talk about patriotic education and “*противодействие технологиям цветных революций*”<sup>87</sup> – a term that made explicit the post-Soviet geopolitical promptings behind state support for the veterans’ associations. In his opening statement, Boris Gromov also stressed that the veterans’ alliances have to prepare future patriots “*в условиях информационной блокады антироссийской пропаганды*”.<sup>88</sup>

For the first time, the members of Battle Brotherhood proclaimed the establishment of a system of participation in protecting the national interests of the state<sup>89</sup> as the main goal of their work. It was added to the union’s statute, which had formerly specified only the protection of veterans’ rights. Participation in “patriotic” events was officially declared “the fundamental duty” for all the union’s members: “*систематическое игнорирование этой задачи без уважительных причин предусматриваются меры повышенной ответственности каждого за бездеятельность и пассивность вплоть до исключения из рядов.*”<sup>90</sup>.

The resolution of the congress stated that over the past years the “patriotic potential” of the organization’s members had been widely reclaimed. Battle Brotherhood annually led up to three thousand patriotic and military memorial events and activities, aimed at supporting presidential domestic and foreign policy (“поддержка внешней и внутренней политики президента”) and counteracting the effects of political opposition (“противодействие деструктивной оппозиции”). In 2015 alone, the union coordinated 10 public events (including a rally to mark the

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<sup>86</sup> Using Pierre Nora’s term (P. Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>87</sup> Istoricheskaya spravka, Bоевое bratstvo website.

<sup>88</sup> V Moskve proshel V Sezd Vserossiiskoi organizatsii Bоевое bratstvo. <YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5JETWo6wiE>>, accessed 6 July 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Ustav Vserossiiskoi obshchestvennoi organizatsii veteranov Bоевое bratstvo, <<https://bbratstvo.com/ob-organizatsii/dokumenty-organizatsii/ustav-vserossijskoj-obshhestvennoj-organizatsii-veteranov-boevoe-bratstvo-redaktsiya-do-14-iyunya-2016-g>>, accessed 16 June 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Istoricheskaya spravka, Bоевое bratstvo website.

first anniversary of the annexation of Crimea) and 30 paramilitary camps for 3,500 young people. As the congress's resolution stated, every third member of the union (out of 105,000) took an active part in the social and political life of the country and sought to promote the dissemination of patriotic feeling ("формирование в стране патриотического большинства").<sup>91</sup>

Among the future goals were listed collaboration with the authorities to aid the preservation of civic order and the protection of the constitutional system of political and social stability in society; implementation of actions that would support the domestic and foreign policy of the president; improvement of the system of participation in youth patriotic education; "protection of the heroic history of the Fatherland", "opposition to the falsification of history".<sup>92</sup> The protection of ex-combatants' rights was not mentioned at all.

Thus, it took Battle Brotherhood less than 19 years to transform from a civil rights organization to a political institution affiliated with the state and working on entrenchment of the norm for the public representation of historical memory (the only true and acceptable norm of historical representation, from the state's perspective) and the boosting of a collective identity centred on the idea of the "winning nation". Added to this, we can see an especially rapid transformation of funding and goals since 2014.

Moreover, the organization has also started working on the development of guidelines for other veterans' alliances. In 2014–2016 it published, for example, the book, *The Volunteer Movement in Russia: Past and Present*,<sup>93</sup> mainly dedicated to "the modern phase of development of the Russian volunteer movement, associated with the humanitarian catastrophe in the Donbass".<sup>94</sup> Publishing of such "scientific-theoretical frameworks for patriotic education"<sup>95</sup> was claimed in the programmes as one of the most important goals.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> The book can be accessed through the website E-Library <<https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=26363491>>, accessed 21 May 2022.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2001-2005 gg.*



**Figure 5.** “Крестный ход-сплав” in Khakassia. War veterans, Cossacks and clergy together with local children took an icon of the Virgin to 56 villages. In the end, they were welcomed by members of the military-sports Centre "Patriot" who showed their skills in hand-to-hand combat and demonstrated "their readiness to serve in the army and defend the Fatherland."<sup>96</sup>

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Alongside Battle Brotherhood, similar transformations affected the other veteran unions. Founded in 1991, more sizable than Battle Brotherhood (about half a million members<sup>97</sup>) but less active (79 branches), the Russian Alliance of Veterans of Afghanistan (Российский Союз Ветеранов Афганистана, RSVА), initially also focused on lobbying for benefits on behalf of the families of war victims,<sup>98</sup> but in the late-2000s fully concentrated on “pre-draft training” in draft

<sup>96</sup> “Krestnyi khod – splav po reke Tom”, CHOU "Pravoslavnaya gimnaziya" website. <<http://www.luka-nk.ru/profilaktika/suitsid/41-vazhnoe/345-krestnyj-khod-splav-po-reke-tom>>, accessed 22 May 2022. The photo was first published in <<https://estafetapokolenij.ru/news/840/>>, accessed 22 May 2022.

<sup>97</sup> Rossiiskii Soyuz veteranov Afganistana, <<https://ru.wikipedia.org/?oldid=97870139>>, accessed 16 June 2019.

<sup>98</sup> See website: <<http://rsva.ru/o-soyuze>>, accessed 15 July 2019.

boards and a conscription advertisement campaign<sup>99</sup> exactly in accordance with the first two Patriotic Education Programmes. RSVA has been carrying out an event for children and adolescents called “В армии служить почетно!” (It is an Honour to Serve in the Military!) that included school lessons called “Служу России!” (“I Serve Russia!”), competitions for the best essay on a topic “Есть такая профессия — родину защищать” (“There is such a Profession — to Defend the Motherland!”), meetings with veterans of the war in Afghanistan.<sup>100</sup> Alongside this, since the late 2000s, all veteran organizations have participated in numerous political.<sup>101</sup>

RSVA became one of the many partners of DOSAAF, the former Soviet paramilitary organization re-established in modern Russia in 2009. Its 10,000 plus branches cover almost all the Russian regions. Members of DOSAAF go through different types of military training; learn to march in formation, shoot from different types of weapons and so on. Predictably, many of DOSAAF’s instructors are members of veterans’ organizations. For instance, the head of RSVA Franz Klintsevich is the head of DOSAAF’s Commission on Patriotic, Spiritual and Moral Education. This interpenetration of the veterans’ alliances and state institutions became a characteristic feature of recent years.

Since the mid-2010s, the activities of RSVA (as well as Battle Brotherhood) have expanded from the mobilization of draftees to work with society in general. Members of the organization have conducted lessons in schools, organized concerts of military songs, set up paramilitary camps and competitions for children, created clubs for young paratroopers. By the end of the 2010s, the actions of unions had attained a socially overarching status. Their audience included preschoolers, schoolchildren, conscripts, military officers, parents of dead soldiers, and the public at large. Geographically, their work covered the whole territory of Russia.

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<sup>99</sup> See: “Permskaya kraevaya organizatsiya Obshcherossiiskoi obshchestvennoi organizatsii ‘Rossiiskii Soyuz veteranov Afganistana’”, <[www.permgaspi.ru/tematicheskie-bloki/velikaya-otechestvennaya-vojna-1941-1945-gg-2/dokumenty-rsva.html](http://www.permgaspi.ru/tematicheskie-bloki/velikaya-otechestvennaya-vojna-1941-1945-gg-2/dokumenty-rsva.html)>

<sup>100</sup> For example, see: “V den’ VDV Komi prisoediniatsya k vsgerossiiskoi aktsii ‘V armii sluzhit – pochejno’”, *Informatsionnoe agentstvo Komiinform*, 24 July 2006, <<https://komiinform.ru/news/37585>>, accessed 1 June 2019.

<sup>101</sup> I address this in more details in Chapter 1.

In the course of just two months, May and June 2019, RSVA held, for example, a round of the military game “Зарница” (Summer Lightning) in the deep forest of Tula Region (17 teams of schoolchildren stormed the fortified positions of the alleged enemy, shot and ran through an obstacle course),<sup>102</sup> and a festival of patriotic songs, “Боевая высота” (Battle Heights), near Ufa (the programme included a concert by *Checkpoint* band and “a field kitchen with traditional soldiers’ porridge”).<sup>103</sup> Veterans also took part in a “sacred rafting” along the river Tom' in Khakassia. Clergymen and veterans from Novokuznetsk sailed 650 km with the icon of the Virgin Mary, making stops in 60 villages and praying "for reviving spiritual traditions, love for the Fatherland, and patriotic education of the younger generation".<sup>104</sup>

The most notable story about the patriotic education of youth was told to me in the city of Nizhniy Tagil. The local RSVA union was called by a kindergarten director and asked if some of the veterans could come there and talk about patriotism with toddlers. Andrei, the head of the union, was confused and tried to discourage the director by explaining that he considers this age too early to talk about wars. The director insisted and explained that the kindergarten was obliged by the local authorities to organize any “patriotic” events. Finally, Andrei found a solution. He asked a former afghanets who had later got ordained as an Orthodox priest to give a patriotic class in this kindergarten. In his interview, Andrei proudly explained that the priest managed to talk to children both about God and about war. The combination of the two topics struck Andrei as ideally patriotic.

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<sup>102</sup> “V Yasnogorskom raione proshla voenno-sportivnaya igra ‘Zarnitsa-2019’”, *Tul'skie novosti*, 10 June, 2016 < [https://newstula.ru/fn\\_454186.html](https://newstula.ru/fn_454186.html) >, accessed 17 June 2019. Zarnitsa was first introduced in 1967 and was widely promoted through the Pioneer movement. The goal of the game was to “develop children’s ability to survive and contribute to a possible future war effort” (L. Dunlop, *Discourses of heroism in Brezhnev's USSR*. DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, Oxford, 2017, p. 110.

<sup>103</sup> “V Ufe sostoyalsya V festival' veteranskoi pesni ‘Boevaya vysota’”, *Gorodskoi portal Ufacity.info* 30 May 2019. < <https://ufacity.info/press/news/327097.html> >, accessed 16 June 2019.

<sup>104</sup> “Krestnyi khod-splav”, *Kemerovskii Soyuz veteranov Afganistana*. <[www.rsva42.ru](http://www.rsva42.ru)>, accessed 16 June 2019.



**Figure 6.** Concert of the Winged Guard band at Russian military base in Syria, August 2020. The band consists of afgantsyand performs Afghan war songs<sup>105</sup>

### **A Hurdy-gurdy as a Weapon of Mental Warfare.**

#### **Patriotic Education of Youth from War Veterans' Perspective**

After the beginning of the war in the south-east of Ukraine, veterans' alliances started working as recruitment centres for mobilizing pro-Russian militias to fight in Donbass and, from 2015, in Syria.<sup>106</sup> “Patriotic education” has moved forward with the Russian troops: the unions began to coordinate “patriotic” activities in Syria. For instance, in February 2016, the RSVA organized a musical tour of a veterans’ band called *Rostov* (it was founded by two veterans of the war in Afghanistan)<sup>107</sup> to the Russian military base Khmeimim. One of the chairmen of RSVA commented to journalists that two generations of soldiers would find a common language: “*Это будет не просто выступление перед публикой, а встреча двух поколений*”

<sup>105</sup> Screenshot from the NTV channel video initially published here: “Moskovskie artistry dali kontsert dlya voennykh na aviabaze Khmeimim”, *NTV*, 23 August 2020. <<https://www.ntv.ru/video/1901361/>>, accessed 23.05.2022.

<sup>106</sup> I discuss this in Chapter 1.

<sup>107</sup> Official site of the band: <<https://gruppa-rostov.ru/>>, accessed 15 July 2019.

*'интернационалистов'. Одни прошли Афган, вторые проходят Сирию. Поверь, им будет о чем поговорить'*.<sup>108</sup>

My informant Yevgeny, an afganets from Yekaterinburg, was one of those who went to Syria to give concerts to Russian troops. After demobilization, Yevgeny became a professional musician and an enthusiast of old folk musical instruments. He brought a hurdy-gurdy to the military base, which he saw as a “weapon” for raising the soldiers' morale: *“Я давно уже к музыкальным инструментам отношусь как тоже к оружию. В ментальной войне - это оружие, на самом-то деле.”* In addition to the concert, Yevgeny and his peers told the Russian soldiers about Afghanistan: *“То есть с народными инструментами знакомим, про свои войны рассказываем, про важность. Им любое внимание хорошо. [...] Когда в Сирию приехал на базу, я у меня ощущение было, как будто я в Кабуле. Природа, дух такой же, только видно что армия совсем другая. То есть там БТР с наворотами, палатки эти надувные. Круто просто.”* According to Yevgeny, it was important for him to grasp this similarity between the wars, and to understand that the Syrian campaign repeats the Afghan one. Notably, in talking about their similarities, he used modern clichés taken from the guidelines for patriotic education programs in relation to these wars: *“Для нашего народа и для нашей армии всегда идея все-таки важна. И борьба с терроризмом - это не пустые слова, и защита опять-таки южных рубежей нашей родины.”*

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Now Yevgeny is one of those who teach "lessons of courage" in the schools of Yekaterinburg on a permanent basis. In his interview, Yevgeny noted that he and other local afgantsy started teaching "lessons of courage" in the late 1990s. At that time, it was a grassroots initiative of the schools; nowadays he and his peers are invited through the federal programme. According to Yevgeny, he gives patriotic education lessons to schoolchildren of all ages, and, just as in Syria,

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<sup>108</sup> A. Anokhin, “Voina neob’yavlennykh geroev: reportazh zhurnalista ‘Amurskoi pravdy’ s rossiiskoi voennoi bazy v Sirii”, *Amurskaya pravda*, 4 February, 16 <<https://www.ampravda.ru/2016/02/04/064070.html>>, accessed 16 June 2019.

brings musical instruments with him: *“Это, как бы сказать, концерты-беседы, то есть творческие ветераны, есть и афганцы, есть и чеченцы, с гитарами, со стихами-песнями, ходим и рассказываем про служение родине. Через творчество, через песню легче достучаться, потому что дети лучше воспринимают это все. (...) Вот у меня программа есть "Заповедные звуки Урала", это бы такая народная тема. Но тоже в воинскую плоскость, про родину, про защиту, про то, как витязи наши это все делали.”*

According to Yevgeny, he does not encourage children to join up in the armed forces, but talks about his own experience of military service and his childhood desire to become a paratrooper: *“Никакой агитации, ничего. Я просто рассказываю про себя, про свой путь, как мы мальчишками росли, как мечта появилась у меня в пятом классе стать десантником. Про это песню пою. (...) Потому что через песню легче достучаться до молодого сердца.”*

Yevgeny and his peers are especially busy on the first of September (the beginning of the school year, when the "lessons of courage" are usually offered), on Victory Day (9th of May) and all of February. The authorities of Yekaterinburg and many other Russian cities have declared February The Defender of the Fatherland Month ("Месячник защитника отечества"). As Yevgeny and other local ex-soldiers told me, from the end of January and until mid-March, they participate in events for children and adults almost every day. Yevgeny regretted that veterans were not paid, but claimed he was ready to work for free: *“Есть проблемы с финансированием патриотики. Поэтому мы на идеологии”*.



**Figure 7.** "Заповедные звуки Урала", a class that my informant Yevgeny taught to children with disabilities at the Centre for Social Assistance to Families at the city of Nizhnyaya Tura in the Ural. Yevgeny demonstrated Russian folk instruments (here, he is holding his hurdy-gurdy), and wore a blue beret – part of the Soviet paratrooper uniform. The class was a part of a big project organized by a veterans' organization.<sup>109</sup>

How do veterans feel about the necessity of participating in mostly unpaid work? I would argue that they perceive it as part of their military service and at the same time the most honourable part of it. In their narratives, taking part in school classes, talking to children, and even organizing paramilitary camps, sounds like carrying out a military order. Therefore, Afghan war veterans consider it natural that in fulfilling this duty they replace veterans of the Great Patriotic War who, quoting Yevgeny, "have begun to wither on the vine" ("*начали увядать*"). Similarly, the veterans are not reflective of the need for patriotic education as such.

<sup>109</sup> "Zapovednye zvuki Urala", Tsentre sotsial'noi pomoshchi sem'e i detyam official website, 6 February 2020.

<<https://zabota139.msp.midural.ru/news/zapovednye-zvuki-urala-47948/?>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

In rare cases they, like Nikolai from Bryansk, regretted that the city administration which involved veterans in patriotic education, was not also engaged in social work with them: *"Патриотизм нужен, без патриотизма страну не вытянешь, но мы походили месяц [по школам], а вы [чиновники] потом хоть раз позвоните этому ветерану с администрации или с каких-то там: 'Как вы живете?' О нас вспоминают только тогда [когда нужно провести уроки в школах]."*

Back in the early 2000s, several of my respondents voluntarily founded children's paramilitary clubs. They felt responsible to work with children and did not question the need for that work. Ali, a Dagestani from the village of Leninaul, opened both a children's club for village children and a museum of the local wars at a local school. In his interview, he regretted that because there are few veterans in the village, local children receive too little attention and information. His neighbor, Karam, complained that modern children think too much about money and careers, and not about serving the Motherland. During the "lessons of courage," students sometimes asked him what social benefits he as a veteran received for his service. I knew that Karam obtained nothing and was very frustrated by this fact; later he went on hunger strike, demanding his social benefits. So, I asked, what did Karam tell children in such cases? He admitted that he would lie to them, knowing that his goal was to persuade them to serve.

Participation in government programmes allows veterans to maintain a military ethos and, even decades after the war that they fought in, to preserve a soldier's identity. This identity transcends any other personal or social identity, at any rate in the long term. Notably, some afgantsy told me that at the moment, Chechen war veterans are rarely involved in the implementation of programmes of patriotic education. However, when they retire and lose the opportunity to think about their career, they will remember their military experience and come to schools: they will simply have no choice.

The only person that disagreed with this position was afganets Vladimir from Bryansk, who, as I discussed in Chapter 1, was exceptional because he organized an anti-war rally there. He

hadnot preserved his military identity and had a negative attitude towards the militarization of society. He resented the practice of bringing veterans to schools as if they were priests (“как попов”), and he also doubted that they had anything to tell children about: “*Что ветераны Сирии будут рассказывать я не знаю, честно говоря.*”

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Another important issue is how the involvement of veterans in patriotic education looks from the state perspective and how state actors relate to it. As far as my fieldwork shows, in many Russian regions people responsible for patriotic education, usually combine two roles: heads of military unions and state officials, so they can fully control both the process of “patriotic” work and its actors. For example, my informant, afganets Vyacheslav, living in the southern Russian city of Bryansk, works as the head of a local War Invalids’ Organization and as a Bryansk Regional Duma deputy, responsible for activities connected with collective memory, commemoration of wars (Bryansk veterans’ already built a war monument and a chapel) and patriotic education. In his interview, Vyacheslav complained about how inactive some veterans were, and that it was impossible to start new projects with such an undisciplined audience. He also explained that he often threaten members of his organization to deprive them of veterans’ social benefits if they are not active enough.

Vyacheslav himself frequently attends schools with “lessons of courage” or gives talks about the war in Afghanistan. Oksana Kozlova, a headteacher in the Kolyudovskaya secondary school, responsible for the patriotic education of students and a school’s Museum of Local Wars, told me that Vyacheslav gives perfect talks while most other veterans do not know how to communicate to a young audience. Usually, Oksana asks children to perform while meeting veterans, not vice versa. Students recite military poems, sing military songs or make Power Point presentations and tell veterans about the local wars. However, Oksana lamented, even this simple scenario is often broken: “*Честно вам скажу: бывает так, что иногда классный руководитель приходит и*

*жалуется: Оксана Николаевна, мы готовились с детьми, а бабушка в наоборот все.*

*Сказал: не надо [ваших выступлений], лучше я вам расскажу.”*



**Figure 8.** Monument to Soldier-Internationalists in Bryansk, erected on the initiative of war veterans in 1993.<sup>110</sup>

The fact that the majority of veterans are not able to cope with the patriotic education of children was told to me by all the performers of patriotic education whom I interviewed, including the former soldiers themselves. Mikhail Svintsov, the head of the Bryansk Movement of Young Patriots (a local paramilitary course for schoolchildren, an analogue of the Yunarmia, created to prepare children for the army) complained that most often draftees of local wars (especially the wars in Chechnya) were uneducated peasants with no public-speaking abilities. While Afghan veterans served in the army for too long and do not distinguish children from soldiers: *“Когда человек 25 лет прослужил в армии, проработал с солдатами, у него подход ко всем как к солдатам. Это тоже вызывает некоторые трудности. Потому что если убрать матерные слова из речи, останутся одни предлоги. Это несколько мешает работе”*.

<sup>110</sup> Photo initially published on the Government of the Bryansk region’s twitter <<https://twitter.com/bryanskoblru/status/1114104187426607106/photo/3>>, accessed 24 May 2022.

Mikhail suggested that the same problems existed with the veterans of the Great Patriotic War, but, as he claimed, they were systematically prepared for public speaking about the war. Mikhail called it “*был институт подготовки ветеранов.*”

The words of my informants (both former soldiers and educators) left the impression that veterans are not required to talk about their own combat experience, but to pronounce a certain text based on the State programs and touching on certain topics, such as patriotism, loyalty to the motherland and comrades, the need to study well at school, serve in the army and lead a healthy lifestyle. As my informant Karam from Leninaul summarized, children should be called to serve in the army by all means: *“Говорите, что им надо служить в армии, в армию надо идти. Вот это мы говорим. Что армия - это хорошая школа для жизни молодого человека. Каждый мальчик должен сегодня быть отслужившим в армии, вот это все мы говорим. И про девочек напоминаем. Мы говорим, за вас девочки не выйдут замуж, если вы не будете служить в армии”*.

Notably, Dagestan also has its regional agenda, which I have not encountered in other regions. Ravshan from Makhachkala told me that he, on the contrary, was convincing children not to go to war, given the pro-Islamic sentiments in this Caucasian republic and the large number of Dagestanis who went to fight for ISIS: *“[Я говорю детям что ] война – это самое такое страшное: грязь, смерть, – там ничего хорошего нет, никакой романтики. Ты стараешься молодежи объяснить, чтобы их не тянуло туда. За романтикой чтобы не тянулись, в Сирию чтобы – с распростёртыми руками там тебя встретят исламское государство”*.

From my interviews, I got the impression that the most important criterion for the narrative of patriotic education was that it should be positive and focused on victory. Mikhail complained that there was only one witness of the Great Patriotic War left in Bryansk, an elderly woman who had been taken to Germany right after the occupation of the city in October 1941. Instead of a victorious narrative about the feats of Soviet soldiers, she, according to Mikhail, *“рассказывает ужасы в концлагере”*. However, Mikhail came up with an elegant way out. The woman had an

older sister who was in the Bryansk partisan movement. Mikhail asked the woman to tell the children about her sister's experience instead of her own. However, she messed everything up again and began to tell *“как тяжело было партизанам.”* As a result, the last witness to the war was prevented from telling the story of the war.

Besides, the narrative of the patriotic lessons must have topical relevance. Oksana claimed that she always tries to make the topics of the lessons relevant, so she tells the children about the Sixth Company who died in Chechnya (I have written about the myth of the Six Company in Chapter 2), about the war in Syria, *“жизнью живем современной.”* When I asked if he was highlighting the war in Donbass while talking to the Young Patriots, Mikhail proudly told me that he was able to base his talks on his own experience. In 2014, he took a leave in the Bryansk House of Culture, where his Movement is based, and went to the fight in Ukraine as a part of the pro-Russian militia. He claimed that this experience gave him a more authoritative voice for working with children.

Oksana (which has no military experience) is worried that children may receive from media a perception of the wars different from the one they get in a classroom. For example, sometimes her students read that the war in Afghanistan was not necessary. In such cases, Oksana explains them that the war was needed to protect Russia: *“Мы не говорим, что мы ввели войска, для того чтобы кого-то колотить, а мы именно с целью мир в данной стране, которая граничит с нашей Россией. Он важен и для нас чтобы, извините за выражение, военные действия не перешли на нашу страну. Поэтому дети это понимают прекрасно. Но мы находим возможности сказать и мягко смягчить некоторые моменты такого исторического факта.”*

Oksana also suggested a solution of how to increase the level of patriotism of children. For example, implement censorship: *“Если бы они, наоборот бы убрали бы со стороны телевизора, интернета некоторые моменты, нам было бы проще. Исторически правильно*

*преподавать ребенку то, что действительно есть. (...) А [для этого] надо ограничить возможности попадания в сеть интернет."*

The lessons of patriotic education at Oksana's school begin in the fourth grade, when children are about 10 years old ("*мы стараемся с ветеранами дружить с четвертого класса*"). How do parents react to what their children are taught at school? According to Oksana, even though the children are very busy with patriotic education (the school prepares lessons for all anniversaries of military events, holds a Patriotic Song Festival every February, and takes children to memorial services for fallen soldiers on memorial days), parents have never complained. They do not mind even if lessons or memorial services are held on weekends or instead of the educational process.

In addition to the problems with veterans, Oksana emphasized an issue with children who do not want to serve. She said the school needs to work with them. In particular, by sending them to military training: "*Есть такие дети, скажем откровенно. Признаемся, и у нас есть такие дети. Но их единицы. [...] Ну, работаем с такими детьми, работаем. Примером работаем, опять таки, приглашаем ветеранов, работаем тем, что вводим детей на учебные сборы, на экскурсии*".

According to Mikhail, there are no pacifists in his movement, but there is a problem of gender imbalance. There are mostly girls who want to join the Young Patriots Movement. Mikhail explained this by the fact that boys grow up later than girls: "*В последнее время пошла такая немножко нехорошая тенденция, скажем так. Все больше становится девочек. Ну почему, они более активные, лучшие в этом возрасте думают и лучше развита память. [...] То есть именно в этом возрасте, да. То есть, скажем, если мы возьмем десятый класс. Потом ребята [мальчики] начинают думать, опережая девочек. И на всю жизнь*".<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> I address gender stereotypes connected with the army in Chapter 3.

The establishment of the patriotic programmes has also generated another consequence, not immediately evident. Ex-servicemen have created around a dozen alliances specifically for running patriotic projects.

The largest of them, *Vympel Military Patriotic Centre*, was organized as early as 1993 by veterans of the security services, most of whom fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Since 1997, the centre has organized summer camps for children and adolescents.<sup>112</sup> There they are prepared for military service and undergo "культурный, нравственный и психологический тренинг" and "вместе с ветеранами обсуждают место подвига в жизни человека"<sup>113</sup>

*Vympel* receives some of its funding through state grants affiliated with the programme of patriotic education. Some of its activities (like participation in most of the camps) are commercial. Over the years, *Vympel* has organized 300 military-patriotic camps.<sup>114</sup> Most of the classes there were taught by current armed forces personnel or war veterans.

The turning point in the history of *Vympel* was reached when the centre began to participate systematically in the implementation of state programmes of patriotic education. At the beginning of the 2010s, it had partnerships with more than 140 veterans' organizations all over Russia<sup>115</sup> and turned into a vast training centre for patriotic education instructors. In the summer of 2019 alone, *Vympel* set up five camps in different regions of Russia. For example, the camp "Antiterror. The

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<sup>112</sup> Here is a description of the camp from mass media: "Ежедневно, утром и вечером, проводится построение. После проверки личного состава исполняется гимн России. Дополнительно, раз в два-три дня, вместо занятий организуются торжественные встречи с ветеранами Великой Отечественной войны, боевых действий в Афганистане и Чечне (...) На торжественных встречах весь лагерь вместе с гостями исполняет российский гимн. После закрытия лагеря практически все помнят слова гимна наизусть. (...) На пятый день начинается изучение серьезных предметов: засады, боевая стрельба. Детей учат пользоваться боевым оружием. Обращение с ним сильно влияет на мировоззрение и психологию детей. Ребенок сразу становится взрослее и, однажды посмотрев на мишень через прорезь прицела, чувствует себя защитником Родины." (V. Davydov, "Detskii spetsnaz", Informatsionno-analiticheskaya sluzhba Russkaya narodnaya liniya, 23 March 2007. <[http://ruskline.ru/monitoring\\_smi/2007/03/23/detskij\\_specnaz/](http://ruskline.ru/monitoring_smi/2007/03/23/detskij_specnaz/)>, accessed 11 June 2019.)

<sup>113</sup> See the report of the *Vympel* organization <<http://vpc-vympel.ru/analiticheskaya-spravka-otchet-za-2015-g/>>, accessed 15 July 2019. *Vympel* does not publish the number of participants of the camps but reported that in 2015 there were more than 2,000 of them (ibid).

<sup>114</sup> Information from the site of the organization <<http://vpc-vympel.ru/antiterror-vector-of-courage/>>, accessed 15 July 2019.

<sup>115</sup> See analytical report of the organization <<http://vpc-vympel.ru/analiticheskaya-spravka-otchet-za-2015-g/>>, accessed 15 July 2019.

Vector of Courage" for adolescents 14-18 years old, held near Volgograd, is characterized by “строгая дисциплина и готовность нести тяжелые физические нагрузки. Это настоящая проверка на силу духа, волю, выдержку”. The camp is held on the territory of a military unit, and children are taught “освободить здания и различные транспортные средства от террористов, обезоруживать и обездвиживать противника, защищаться при нападении.”<sup>116</sup> In all of the camps, adolescents have to follow a strict daily regime, are not allowed to use mobile phones, and cannot call parents earlier than on the third day of training.

Now *Vympel's* members give methodological workshops throughout the country where they prepare trainers for paramilitary camps. The organization even opened its own publishing house. For example, in 2014, it published the handbook *Spiritual, Moral, Heroic and Patriotic Education in the Educational Process of Patriotic Associations*.<sup>117</sup>

Thus, the implementation of The Patriotic Education Programme has not only encouraged some of the veterans' unions to make a shift from protecting rights of veterans to the promotion of patriotism, but has also created a specific "patriotic" infrastructure that also consists mostly of war veterans.

Notable also is the participation of war veterans in activities that not only foster patriotism and knowledge of the military past, and promotion of a maximally positive image of the armed forces, but that also seek to inculcate military skills and 'readiness for battle' in children and young people. The immediate parallel here is less the late Soviet period than the 1930s (the “Ready for Labour and Defence” movement), though without the “fitness for work” element that existed at that era.

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<sup>116</sup> For the description of the camp see <<http://vpc-vympel.ru/antiterror-vector-of-courage/>>, accessed 17 July 2019.

<sup>117</sup> “Dukhovno-nravstvennoe i geroiko-patrioticheskoe vospitanie v obrazovatel'nom protsesse patrioticheskikh ob"edinenii”, *Voенно-patrioticheskii tsentr ‘Vympel’*, no. 2, 2015. <<https://www.xn--b1aajydqc7c5b.xn--p1ai/metodicheskie-rekomendatsii/dukhovno-patrioticheskoe-i-geroiko-patrioticheskoe-vospitanie-v-obrazovatel'nom-protsesse-patrioticheskikh-obedinenij>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

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Perhaps most strikingly, Russian programmes of patriotic education are not limited by the borders of Russia. Since 2009, paramilitary youth camps have been organized by Russian ex-servicemen in Belarus, Serbia, Latvia, and the USA.

In August 2016, the Serbian authorities shut down the military camp *Zlatibor* in a remote part of Western Serbia. The camp was organized by Veterans of the Yugoslav War Society, Russian Cossack Military Union Banner (“Ратное объединение ‘Стяг’”) and Russian Union E.N.O.T. Corps. All of these groups were composed of war veterans, most of whom had been mercenaries in Serbian military units during the Yugoslav wars and later fought in the south-east of Ukraine.<sup>118</sup> Military education is prohibited in Serbia, and the country’s president Alexander Vučić, commenting on the closure, stated that “*military exercises for children – that’s not [how we see] Serbia of the future*”.<sup>119</sup> Despite this, in summer 2019, veterans of the *Yugoslav War Society* and *Styag* opened three other camps.<sup>120</sup>

Paramilitary camps, similar to Russian ones and led by Russian Cossacks and ex-servicemen, were also working in Washington, Oregon, and California.<sup>121</sup> In 2018, the state parliament of Latvia banned citizens from taking part in Russian patriotic youth camps (after numerous such cases).<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> K. Avramov, “Patriotic Youth Camps: Recruiting Next Generation ‘Russian World’ Supporters”, *The Globe Post*, 8 October, 2018, <<https://theglobepost.com/2018/10/08/patriotic-russian-youth-camps/>>, accessed 7 June 2019.

<sup>119</sup> “V Serbii zakryli lager', gde detei obuchali rossiiskie voennye instruktory”, *Korrespondent.net*, 17 August 2018 <<https://korrespondent.net/world/4001884-v-serbyy-zakryly-laher-hde-detei-obuchaly-rossyiskye-voennye-ynstruktory>>, accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>120</sup> Удружење учесника оружаних сукоба на простору бившее Југославије <<http://www.uosyu.org.rs/poziv-za-ucesce-na-drugom-omladinskom-patriotskom-kampu-zlatibor-2019/>>, accessed 18 July 2019.

<sup>121</sup> R. Gurzhiev, “Zachem Kremlyu voenizirovannye otryady na territorii SSHA?”, *Slavic News in California*, 25 August 2017, <<https://www.slavicsac.com/2017/08/25/russian-special-forces-usa/>>, accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>122</sup> “Seim Latvii zapretil detyam uchastvovat v rossiiskikh voennykh lageryakh”, *RIA Novosti*, 3 May 2018 <<https://ria.ru/20180503/1519816075.html>>, accessed 17 June 2019.



**Figure 9.** Combat Karate demonstration at Community Outreach Academy, Sacramento, California.<sup>123</sup>

According to political scientist Sergey Sukhankin, the idea of holding “youth patriotic camps” represents a two-tier “hybrid” strategy for Moscow based on proselytizing to youths (fostering pro-Russian and anti-Western feelings) and conveying skills and knowledge relevant to subversive actions as a part of non-linear military operations.<sup>124</sup> Most of western commentators connect the appearance of these camps with Russian state patriotic programmes and see them as elements in a broader structure that is part of modern Russian mobilization policies.<sup>125</sup>

However, the information from the camps' organizers gives the impression that most of the camps are working independently from the Russian state, using horizontal connections with local military unions. Or, alternatively, Russia hides its involvement in the camps' work being afraid of

<sup>123</sup> Gurzhiev, “Zachem Kremlyu voenizirovannye otryady na territorii SSHA”.

<sup>124</sup> S. Sukhankin, “Russian PMCs, War Veterans Running ‘Patriotic’ Youth Camps in the Balkans”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 15, no. 151, 2018. <<https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-war-veterans-running-patriotic-youth-camps-in-the-balkans-part-one/>>, accessed 8 June 2019.

<sup>125</sup> K. Avramov, “Patriotic Youth Camps”.

the other countries reaction. One also can hypothesize that the camps work as commercial enterprises, receiving money from the parents of trainees, and use the Russian patriotic programmes as a “brand name” that allows them to offer similar “patriotic” services.

### **“To Brush aside False Rhetoric”.**

#### **The Leitmotifs and Terminology of the Patriotic Education Campaign**

Documents that govern patriotic education in Russia are usually written with a double readership in mind. According to sociologist Elena Omelchenko, to external observers, the notions from the documents seem to be made up of repetitive clichés, while people, working from inside the official discourse are capable to read and recognizing the real meanings behind the used phrases.<sup>126</sup> I would likewise argue that the texts of the Patriotic Education Programmes, as well as documents produced by veterans’ unions, share the same rhetorical moves, concepts and leitmotifs, and actualize the same problems (as well as leaving the same problems undiscussed). Below I will analyze some of official documents of veterans’ organizations, such as statutes, handbooks, public talks of their leaders and newsfeeds from their official sites. I want to find out which rhetorical moves are used more frequently than others, and how they are interpreted. I assume that in some cases veterans use state rhetoric in their own interests, and sometimes redefine concepts, offered by the state, so the clichés received new meanings.

Alongside this, I want to trace the main features of the state discourse associated with the war. For example, to show how the heroic discourse that had been used previously during the official ceremonies dedicated to the Second World War, has slowly spread to commemorations of all wars waged by Russia from the invasion to Afghanistan and on. I also claim that the language that is used to foster and describe veterans’ ceremonials for converting the past, is tightly connected with the State patriotic programmes.

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<sup>126</sup> Omel'chenko, “Kaknauchit' lyubit' Rodinu?”, p. 276.

- *Patriotism*

“Patriotism” is the most frequently used term in any documents or handbooks of veterans’ alliances. The documents imply that every citizen must be a patriot or strive to become a patriot. Veterans claim that growing patriots is the main goal of the classes they lead in school. Online materials are extremely optimistic about the success of this operation. For example, a brochure produced by the school patriotic club Young Contingent, established by the Primorsky organization of war veterans, Contingent (based in the city of Vladivostok), claims that children who took part in veteran-led sessions became patriots from the moment they came into contact with these military heroes: *“Патриотический клуб «Юный контингент» начал работу с одиннадцати- и двенадцатилетними ребятами. За две недели до образования клуба мы начали рассказывать детям о том, кто такой настоящий герой, как у каждого рядом есть герой, просматривали фотографии морских пехотинцев. В результате (...) все 16 человек теперь настоящие патриоты.”*<sup>127</sup>

Elena Omelchenko noted that the notion of patriotism which prevails in today’s Russia replicates the patterns characteristic of Soviet education, according to which any Soviet citizen was a patriot by default. Within this framework, any judgments that could be seen as even slightly non-patriotic were evaluated as anti-Soviet. Perestroika made debates about patriotism legitimate again. But the time period between the beginning of Perestroika and Putin’s presidency turned to be not enough time to erode moralizing attitudes and shake the fixed idea of the a priori duty of every citizen to be a patriot of his homeland.<sup>128</sup> In the state programmes of the 2010s, this idea came back. The actors of the programmes, i.e. the veterans, sensed this return of patriotism too. My informant Evgeniy, a head of a small union, “Soldiers of Russia”, based in the city of Yekaterinburg, explained that in the 1990s, “patriotism” was a dirty word, and while meeting with

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<sup>127</sup> “Patriotic Club "Young Contingent" website, <<http://www.dvkontingent.ru/patrioticheskij-klub-yunyj-kontingent-licej-vgues./>>, accessed 6 June 2019.

<sup>128</sup> Omel'chenko, “Kaknauchit' lyubit' Rodinu?”, p. 272.

children he felt the lack of their interest towards it. He was happy to record that nowadays it has changed:

*“В 90 е годы - мы пережили это - слово ‘патриот’ было ругательным, это слово нельзя было произносить. И мы тяжело переживали, это я помню. Я всю жизнь с детьми встречался, беседы всякие, творческие вечера, концерты и так далее. Я помню эти пустые глаза детей в 90-е годы. [...] Сегодня, например, взгляд молодежи - он наполнен, они интересуются, они спрашивают, они тебя глазами едят. А тогда они в пустоту смотрели. Это было потерянное [поколение], потому что не было идеологии, не было страны и непонятно, как жить.”*

The notion of patriotism in the state patriotic education programmes is quite explicit and has not been changed since 2001: *“Чувства верности своему Отечеству, готовности к выполнению гражданского долга и конституционных обязанностей по защите интересов Родины.”*<sup>129</sup> The term “верность” (“loyalty”) is mentioned in the programmes several times. It implies loyalty to the state and to the government.

Analyzing the notions of patriotism in the approach of the veterans' organizations, I would like to use the classical dichotomy of "constructive" and "blind" patriotism, developed by Robert T. Schatz, Ervin Staub and Howard Lavine.<sup>130</sup> The authors distinguished between these two types of patriotism, and hypothesized that "patriotism based in unconditional positive evaluation and unquestioning allegiance" (blind patriotism) "could be empirically distinguished from patriotism based in constructive criticism and critical loyalty"<sup>131</sup> (constructive patriotism). They linked the blind version of patriotism with nationalism, feelings of national vulnerability, a need to resist ostensible threats and fears that external forces threaten both national security and national culture.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2001-2005 gg.*

<sup>130</sup> R. T. Schatz, E. Staub and H. Lavine, “On the Varieties of National Attachment: Blind versus Constructive Patriotism”, *Political Psychology*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1999, pp. 151-174.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, P. 153.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, P. 155.

I would contend that the readiness to protect the state “in peacetime and wartime”,<sup>133</sup> and to express unconditional loyalty to the state, as mentioned in all the Programmes, constitutes a typical example of “blind” patriotism. It expresses a strongly militarized ethos, requiring obedience and even self-sacrifice to the state; it implies fear of real or imaginary external threats; and, as Anna Sanina points out, does not give Russian citizens the ability to develop the critical thinking and thus the skills to make decisions based on a clear understanding and awareness of one’s own actions.<sup>134</sup>

At the same time, according to Elena Omelchenko, the notion of patriotism in modern Russia is ideologically over-determined. The use of this term is disputed by almost all leaders of both loyal and opposition parties, but with radically different meanings and in widely varying contexts. The term is overloaded with imperial connotations, saturated with Soviet memory, and put under the weight of nationalistic sentiments.<sup>135</sup>

One important constituent in the “overloading” is that the documents of veterans’ unions related to patriotic education, while citing the state programmes, do not offer a clear definition of patriotism. All notions seem to be embraced: *“Для патриотического воспитания необходимо воспитывать следующие духовно-нравственные качества: патриотизм, человеколюбие, милосердие, терпимость...”*<sup>136</sup> These qualities are very different from the military commitment to duty advocated elsewhere. Not surprisingly, in the circumstances, the definitions on the whole emphasize less the qualities of patriotism itself than the importance of its practical application: *“Патриотизм есть важнейший мобилизационный ресурс общества (социальной группы, этноса, личности), направленный на решение важнейших стратегических, геополитических, национальных, культурных и других проблем”*.<sup>137</sup> But even here (with

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<sup>133</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2001-2005 gg.*

<sup>134</sup> A. Sanina, Patriotism and Patriotic Education in Contemporary Russia, *Russian Social Science Review*, vol. 59, no. 5, 2018, pp. 476.

<sup>135</sup> Omel'chenko, “Kak nauchit' lyubit' Rodinu?”, p. 268.

<sup>136</sup> *Dukhovno-nravstvennoe i geroiko-patrioticheskoe vospitanie v obrazovatel'nom protsesse patrioticheskikh ob"edinenii*, Moscow: VPC “Vympel”, 2014.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

patriotism represented as purely instrumental, a contribution to “problem solving”), there is a clear fault-line between different strata of rhetoric.

The conflicts become all the more obvious when the documents indicate what they do not consider to be patriotism. Here is the description of such anti-patriotic phenomena from the DOSAAF handbook:

*“Так называемый ‘современный’ патриотизм, как он позиционируется в демократически-модернизированном варианте, ‘просвещенный’, ‘гуманный’, ‘социальный’, ‘гражданский’, ‘либеральный’, ‘новый’. Он устраняет необходимость защиты Отечества и военной службы в смысле службы в реальной армии, игнорируя иные угрозы, направленные против национальных интересов и безопасности Российской Федерации. К сожалению, даже [...] патриотическое воспитание [...] не имеет достаточной военной составляющей. [...] Высшая форма патриотизма — самоотверженная борьба с врагами Отечества.”<sup>138</sup>*

Ultimately, it seems that “to be a patriot” for ideologists of veterans’ alliance means to live as if a war has ready to begin or already started. Yet, while remaining “blind” and based on uncritical loyalty to the state, this type of patriotism is slightly different from the state one. It is much more militarized and does not regulate citizens’ behaviour in peacetime. If the programmes of patriotic education are aimed at regulating everyday life and transforming the consciousness of young people, the veterans' goal, I would conclude, is mainly or exclusively to prepare them to take part in an actual war. Such a vision of patriotism allows veterans to identify themselves as people who have truly proven their loyalty and love to the Motherland. Notably, in interviews with me none of them was able to give a clear definition of patriotism. Vladimir from Moscow, involved into the “patriotic education” of children in the Ryazanskiy district of the capital where he lives, explained that his “patriotic” work includes military camps where he prepares children for military service,

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<sup>138</sup> V. I. Lutovinov. *Metodicheskie rekomendatsii po organizatsii patrioticheskogo vospitaniya*, Moscow: ANO SPO SOTIS, 2018.

telling them about different battles of the Great Patriotic War and about the search for the corpses of fallen soldiers; *“Показывают, что такое дружба и поддержка товарища, возим разные там события Великой отечественной войны показываем, как это было. [...] Очень дети заинтересованы это работой наших поисковых отрядов, где дети восстанавливают имена людей, которые знаете, их давно нет, а вот имя восстановили.”* Other informants also tried to define patriotism by listing actions that they involved children in. It included the firing of different types of weapons, paramilitary trainings, lectures about the war experience of veterans themselves and all sorts of propaganda about the importance of military service. Dagestani Ali from the village of Leninaul, who is making a “patriotic club” in a local school, explained that his main goal was to prepare *“воинов, защитников”*. He proudly claimed that after his club all the children were ready to serve in the Russian army which he stated as *“были настоящими патриотами.”*

Along with the notion of patriotism, most of the documents use the concept of “national idea”, invoked, for example, as *“фактор сплочения национального пространства Российского государства в духовном пространстве православия”*.<sup>139</sup>

As the sociologist Iskander Yasaveev points out, since the beginning of the 2010s, Vladimir Putin has repeatedly called patriotism the Russian national idea. At the beginning of the 2000s, Putin said that economic growth was the national idea. Thus, the militarization of patriotism has been accompanied by its presentation as a national idea, and by the refusal any longer to claim the competitiveness of the country as the national idea.<sup>140</sup> In 20 years, patriotism has shrunk into a synonym of militarism and a readiness to fight the ‘fascist’ enemy whenever that may be needed.

### **- Heroic History and the Succession of the Feat of Arms**

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<sup>139</sup> *Dukhovno-nravstvennoe i geroiko-patrioticheskoe vospitanie*, p. 54.

<sup>140</sup> Yasaveev, "Leitmotivy vlastnoi ritoriki", pp. 56.

The patriotic education handbook published by the centre *Vympel*, has a chapter “The history of the great victories of the Russian army and navy”. It is divided into two paragraphs: “The great victories of the Russian army” and “The great victories of the Russian navy”.<sup>141</sup> All wars (and, more broadly, any events from Russian history) mentioned in the unions’ documents are described as “heroic” and “righteous”. For example, here is a list of topics for the children’s essays competition, organized by *Vympel*: “Героическая история страны; слава русской армии; победы русского оружия; преемственность ратного подвига.”<sup>142</sup>

“The continuity of the feat”<sup>143</sup> became an important leitmotiv in many veterans’ documents. In 2018, Battle Brotherhood’s chairman Boris Gromov proclaimed the necessary to recall “героизм и мужество всех наших соотечественников, принимавших участие в 22 локальных войнах и вооруженных конфликтах, связанных с защитой национальных интересов СССР и России”.<sup>144</sup> The same narrative about heroic deeds of all Russian veterans is repeated in most of the union’s documents.

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<sup>141</sup> *Dukhovno-nravstvennoe i geroiko-patrioticheskoe vospitanie*, p. 52.

<sup>142</sup> Polozhenie o konkurse tvorcheskii rabot “Doroga k obelisku”, <<http://vpc-vympel.ru/polozhenie-o-konkurse-tvorcheskih-rabot-doroga-k-obelisku/>>, accessed 2 June 2019.

<sup>143</sup> The notion of “подвиг” is particularly important. Unlike the English counterpart, it means not only the result or achievement but also the heroic deed itself, often in a hopeless situation.

<sup>144</sup> Boris Gromov’s speech at the Committee for the Coordination of Joint Activities of Veteran Associations: <<https://bbratstvo.com/2018/02/24/doklad-borisa-gromova-na-zasedanii-komiteta-po-koordinacii-sovmestnoy-deyatelnosti-veteranskih-obedineniy/>>, accessed 8 June 2019.



**Figure 10.** A souvenir with soil from the Donetsk Airport (below) in the main exposition of Moscow Museum of Afghan War History.<sup>145</sup>

Strikingly, in talking about the past, veterans’ (both my informants in their interviews and the leaders of the unions in their official speeches) routinely resort to leitmotifs and clichés from contemporary official discourse. For example, explaining the negative assessment of the Afghan war in 1990s, Gromov uses the modern terms “international terrorist threat”, “the shameful and tacit criminal collusion of liberals and the West”. The campaign itself Gromov calls “the first war against radical Islam” and “the pre-emptive reaction of the USSR leadership to [...] international terrorism”. The Taliban movement is branded “a terrorist group controlled by the CIA”.<sup>146</sup> In general, Gromov explains the war as a confrontation between the USSR and the States, the results

<sup>145</sup> In 2014, the Donetsk airport became a place of a major battle between Ukraine and pro-Russia militia. The photo was made during my fieldwork in Moscow in 2019.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

of which were incorrectly explained to the people by “pro-American liberals-dissidents”, because “in those years the authorities [...] could not explain to the people in a simple and clear language of geopolitics, that without us the Americans would be there [in Afghanistan] with their military bases “and that “Our 40th army was fighting with extremists not for loyal Kabul but for the safe future of our country”.<sup>147</sup> It is pertinent to compare this quotation with the contemporary official discourse of fighting ISIS in Syria “only in the national interests of the Russian Federation”.<sup>148</sup>

One of the most striking details about the memorial events organized by military unions is that the sites of memory and commemoration practice precisely connected with one military conflict are often used to commemorate another. Thus, for example, the fight for the rights of the Russian population in Chechnya can be linked to the fight for the rights of the Russian population in Donbass, or the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan with the Russian invasion to Syria. In *Vypel's* documents it is called “*преемственность ратного подвига*” (“succession of the feat of arms”).<sup>149</sup>

I assume that this motive of martial succession is borrowed from the first state programme of the patriotic education. That recommended a wider use of veterans’ “*опыт и духовный потенциал*” for “preservation and succession of glorious military and labour traditions”.<sup>150</sup>

Evidently, the Great Patriotic War, the site of memory with a very high “commemorative density”,<sup>151</sup> became the most vivid example of building historical continuity. Any events connected with it are presented at public discourse as heroic, victorious and righteous. Allusions to this war permeate all ‘patriotic education’ materials connected with any wars waged by Russia. For example, as a snatch of a song from Leonid Bykov’s 1973 movie about Soviet airmen in the Second World War (“*Кто сказал, что надо бросить песни на войне? После боя сердце*

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> “Ivanov o voennoioperatsii v Sirii: Rech' o natsional'nykhinteresakh”, *RIA Novosti*, 20 September 2015 <<https://ria.ru/20150930/1293017839.html>>, accessed 12 June 2019.

<sup>149</sup> *Polozhenie o konkursetvorcheskiirabot “Doroga k obelisku”*.

<sup>150</sup> Pravitel'stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na2001-2005 gg.*

<sup>151</sup> Using the term offered by Yael Zerubavel (Y. Zerubavel, *Collective Memory And The Making of Israeli National Tradition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.)

*просит музыки вдвойне!*”) is used by a member of *Rostov* band in the description of the band’s performance at the Russian military base in Syria, organized by Battle Brotherhood. The author rhetorically asks what the difference between the Second World War pilots singing this song in the old Soviet movie, and contemporary military pilots, and answers that the only difference is “геометрия крыла [самолетов] да масштаб ракетно-бомбовой нагрузки. Остальное как под копирку. Та же война, те же люди. И позади Москва, кто бы там ни говорил, что ‘эта война не наша’”.<sup>152</sup>

The link between the Syrian campaign and the Second World War is also emphasized in the lyrics of *Rostov*’s songs: “Кто-то мин здесь понатыкал через край/ По сторонам смотри, не зевай. / Я соседству такому не рад. Ведь город Ракка – как у нас Сталинград”.<sup>153</sup>

There are not the only rhetorical moves that are used for the building of “succession of the feats” and never-ending heroic history. Sites of memory connected with famous military campaigns are widely used in commemorating other, less popular, wars. For example, in May 2019, the Smolensk Branch of RSVA organized an event called “Angels of Donbasss” dedicated to the children killed since 2014 in the DNR (“в память о детях, погибших в военных действиях в Донецкой народной республике”); it was held near the “eternal flame” – a symbol dedicated to the Great Patriotic War.<sup>154</sup>

Similarly, on Victory Day, 2017, in Krasnodar, veterans of the Afghan war marched in a military parade, dressed in uniforms from the time of the Great Patriotic War. As Dmitry Lebedev, the head of the regional branch of the RSVA later commented, “амуниция, знаки различия – все подлинное. А ветераны Великой Отечественной войны со слезами на глазах встают,

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<sup>152</sup> A. Anokhin, “Rossiiskie artisty zazhgli v Sirii”, *Amurskaya Pravda*, 2 November 2016, <[www.ampravda.ru/2016/02/11/064267.html](http://www.ampravda.ru/2016/02/11/064267.html)>, accessed 1 June 2019.

<sup>153</sup> The music video on the band’s website <<https://gruppa-rostov.ru/video/39-gruppa-rostov-premera-pesni-nebo-sirii.html>>, accessed 1 June 2019.

<sup>154</sup> “Smolenskaya oblast' prisoedinilas' k aktsii ‘Angely Donbasssa’”, *Rabochiy Put*, 1 June 2019. <<https://www.rabochy-put.ru/news/116100-smolenskaya-oblast-prisoedinilas-k-aktsii-angely-donbasssa.html>>, accessed 1 June 2019.

*чтобы поприветствовать воинов-‘афганцев’ – своих достойных наследников.*”<sup>155</sup> Dmitry Lebedev also told journalists that he had passed to the local military museum an identity card once belonging to Alexander Mironenko, a soldier who had blown himself up with a grenade in Afghanistan. Mironenko’s death was exactly like one in the more recent Syrian conflict; he had acted just like Roman Filipov (“*также, как это сделал в Сирии летчик Роман Филипов*”) That was what made his example so powerful: “*Представляете силу воздействия таких экспонатов на молодежь, на их сознание?*”<sup>156</sup>

In sum, the events held by the military unions, and the documents they publish, are aimed at nullifying the differences between military campaigns. Coming into schools, veterans can talk at random about the capture of Berlin, Chechen Khankala, Ukrainian Debaltsevo, or Syrian Palmyra. All these stories will fit into the same heroic narrative and perform exactly the same structural function – of reinforcing the continuity of Russian military life and military heroism.

Significantly, some of the veterans’ unions (for instance, Vypel, which took its name from a special unit of the Federal Security Service) emphasize the affiliation of their members and paramilitary training instructors, not with the exact war, but with the exact type of troops or special forces. The documents of the veterans' unions give the impression that the war is permanent; the only thing which is important (for both veterans and participants of “patriotic” activities) is not when the peace will come but in what type military forces they will spend this war.

We also see here an inversion of memory. Instead of explaining modern geopolitical events using the frame of their past experience, veterans adopt modern political clichés for explaining their war past. By interiorizing the state discourse, just like by relating to wars and a way to obtain masculinity and go through male initiation (which I look at in Chapter 3) veterans avoid thinking of the meaninglessness of the wars they have fought at and their own traumatic experience.

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<sup>155</sup> “Dmitrii Lebedev: ‘My gordimsya nashimi voynami, ikh besprimernymi podvigami!’”, *Kubanskie novosti*, 26 February, 2018, <<https://kubnews.ru/obshchestvo/2018/02/26/dmitriy-lebedev/>>, accessed 6 June 2019.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

Added to this, the appearance of the narrative of heroic history in ex-servicemen's public talks and documents corresponds with state discourse and shows unions' loyalty. It becomes another route by which veterans' interests converge with those of the state.

### – *Distortion of History*

Along with creating heroic discourses that echo motifs in state programmes, veterans' alliances appeal to another standard element in the programmes: the complaint that "falsification of history" [фальсификация] or "distortion of history" [искажение] is underway and that it is essential to fight this (for example, this is one of the statutory goals of Battle Brotherhood).<sup>157</sup> The need to "brush aside false rhetoric" ("*отместил живую риторку*")<sup>158</sup> is one of the main leitmotifs of all the unions. The allegations of distortion are not necessarily connected with the history of wars that veterans took part in. For example, in April 2019, the Russian Union of Afghan Veterans published an open letter to Vladimir Putin about the inadmissibility of falsification of the "Katyn case". The letter states that the representation of Soviet NKVD forces as the perpetrators of the massacre of Polish officers in Katyn "is one of the most sophisticated and dangerous tools of the informational hybrid war against the Russian Federation, actively used by the authorities of today's Poland and our enemies abroad." RSWA claimed that the real perpetrators of the shooting were the German occupiers, and not the NKVD.<sup>159</sup> Veterans called members of the public in Russia to "*объединить свои усилия для восстановления исторической правды, почтить память павших в бою против фашизма, не допустить переписывания и фальсификации истории Второй мировой войны.*"<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ustav Vserossiiskoi obshchestvennoi organizatsii veteranov Boevoe bratstvo, <<https://bbratstvo.com/ob-organizatsii/dokumenty-organizatsii/ustav-vserossijskoj-obshhestvennoj-organizatsii-veteranov-boevoe-bratstvo-redaktsiya-do-14-iyunya-2016-g>>, accessed 16 June 2019.

<sup>158</sup> Boris Gromov's speech at the Committee for the Coordination of Joint Activities of Veteran Associations.

<sup>159</sup> This version has no support in contemporary evidence, but is widespread in Russian conservative circles and neatly reproduces the official Soviet explanation of the mass murder until the glasnost era.

<sup>160</sup> "Krupneishaya politicheskaya provokatsiya XX veka", RSWA Website, <<http://rsva.ru/archive/3832-krupneishaya-politicheskaya-provokatsiya-khkh-veka>>, accessed 24 May 2019.

However, most of the accusations in spreading “false rhetoric” are levelled against those who engage in criticism of the war in Afghanistan. “30-летняя деятельность по сохранению исторической памяти и недопущению фальсификации значения специальной операции советских войск в Афганистане”<sup>161</sup> – that was Gromov’s definition of the activity of the veterans’ alliances. It implies that everything beyond the heroic discourse built by the union can be called false and should be prohibited.<sup>162</sup>

### - *Spiritual Values*

Another term, frequently used in the documents about patriotic education is “values” [ценности], “spiritual” or “historical”. The Patriotic Education Programme 2001-2005 regrets the modern fragmentation and differentiation of society on economic grounds and the devaluation of spiritual values, and claims that one of the goals of the patriotic education is the revival of true “spiritual values” and an establishment of historically-based alternative “patriotic feelings”: “патриотических чувств и гражданского сознания, основанных на исторических ценностях и исторической роли России в судьбах мира”.<sup>163</sup>

The term “spiritual values” has a wide meaning. One of the programme’s paragraphs relates it to family matters – “ориентировать молодежь на правильное репродуктивное поведение и создание семьи на основе возрождения традиционных нравственных ценностей”, and another to the national past, suggesting that a patriotic computer game should be created using plots from “the heroics of national history” (“героизм национальной истории”) to make players “осознать исторические ценности и роль России в судьбах мира”.<sup>164</sup> “Ценности” repeatedly appears also in *Vypel’s* handbooks. For example, the authors give a list of basic values: "duty, honour, patriotism"; moral values: "honesty, loyalty, respect for elders, hard work, patriotism" and

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Of course, Gromov’s and other veterans’ rhetoric started sounding different after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine when all anti-war statements became indeed prohibited. The described views, formerly marginal, became mainstream.

<sup>163</sup> Pravitel’stvo RF, *Patrioticheskoe vospitanie na 2001-2005 gg.*

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

"supreme values": "the defence of the Fatherland".<sup>165</sup> The Tver branch of Battle Brotherhood holds school "lessons of courage" called "Values of the 21st Century". There, the schoolchildren watch videos about their peers "who performed feats in peacetime".<sup>166</sup>

In sum, the concept of values is instrumentalized to assert the same militaristic rhetoric and to build an image of the country preparing for a fight, where the supreme value is to defend it from its enemies. Strikingly, in the list of values, one will never find listed freedom, individualism or independence.

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<sup>165</sup> *Dukhovno-nravstvennoe i geroiko-patrioticheskoe vospitanie*, p. 56.

<sup>166</sup> "V Kalyazinskom raione Tverskoe oblastnoe "Boevoe bratstvo" provelo srazu neskol'ko urokov muzhestva", Boevoe Bratstvo Website. <<https://bbratstvo.com/2019/03/14/v-kalyazinskom-rayone-tverskoe-oblastnoe-boevoe-bratstvo-provelo-srazu-neskolko-urokov-muzhestva>>, accessed 4 July 2019.



**Figure 11.** An award ceremony for a Military-patriotic camp “Serving the atherland! Yaroslavl - 2019”. FSB officers award participants blue berets, symbols of the Presidential Regiment of Russia (part of the FSO troops).<sup>167</sup>

## Conclusion

During the 1990s, veterans had little part in patriotic education, which indeed was at a historically low ebb. However, it took no more than two decades for veterans’ alliances, established as a means for commemorating the fallen, as well as helping the survivors, to become one of the central institutions in state memory politics and an integral part of all “patriotic” events and actions with military associations.

<sup>167</sup> The photograph as initially published in Vympel Military Patriotic Centre official website at: "Podvedeny itogi II Mezhhregional'noi voenno-patrioticheskoi smeny 'Sluzhu Otechestvu! Yaroslavl' — 2019", Vympel Military Patriotic Centre official website. <<https://xn--b1aajydqc7c5b.xn--p1ai/predydushchie-vyezdy/podvedeny-itogi-ii-mezhhregionalnoj-voenno-patrioticheskoy-smeny-sluzhu-otchestvu-yaroslavl-2019>>, accessed 23 May 2022.

From the early 2000s, which marked the beginning of revival of patriotism-based state ideology, the start of a rehabilitation of the cult of the Great Patriotic War<sup>168</sup> and the onset of the intensive militarization of public discourse, the state and the military elites became the main initiators of veterans' unions' reforms. They re-formulated the narratives of the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya. The topics of heroism and sacrifice took the place of the themes of grief and pointless deaths.

At the beginning of the 2010s, after the implementation of the third Patriotic Education Programme, the organizations switched from social work to ideological work. Many of them changed their statutes and declared new goals: they moved from taking care of brothers-in-arms to taking care of patriotic ideology and political order. The role of members of the veterans' unions has also been changed. They are now obliged to take part in ideological "patriotic" activities or leave their organizations.

A kind of memory annexation emerged. On the one side, using the patriotic programmes and creating new war narratives, the state began to shape the memories of veterans. From the other side, the veterans' themselves were encouraged by the state request for promotion of the new ideology, which gave them a renewed sense of political and social relevance, and internalized the official memorial narrative.

The state demand for patriotic work has crucially affected the community of war veterans. Yet the leverage this has granted, in my view, has mainly been to the leaders of the movement, and to various types of professional gatekeeper and mediator (e.g. officially-approved historians, schoolteachers, youth workers, military skills trainers). Even if it looks like a form of public recognition, this work does nothing to solve most veterans' own problems (e.g. the need for welfare support, employment and so on.). Since the vast majority of veterans are not involved in

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<sup>168</sup> A lot of researchers have already studied this topic. See, for example: M. Gabovich, "Pamyatnik i prazdnik: ehntografiya Dnya Pobedy", *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, vol. 3, no. 101, 2015. <<http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2015/3/9g.html>>, accessed 8 June 2019.; B. Dubin, "Bremya pobedy. Boris Dubin o politicheskom upotreblenii simbolov", *Kriticheskaya massa*, vol. 2, 2005. <<http://magazines.russ.ru/km/2005/2/du6.html>>, accessed 15 June 2019.

the event organization and other initiatives, patriotic work does nothing to integrate them into society. Indeed, given the scaling-back of social work with veterans, it is likely that the transformation of activities has further marginalized veterans, isolated them from the surrounding society, and united them inside their own closed social groups. Veterans involved in patriotic activities, internalizing the state's attitude towards them, connect their lives with military or paramilitary service, while refraining from building self-identity on a civil basis. Even several decades after the wars, they continue to live on a mental frontline. Those not involved are simply left with the aftermath of their experience.

As a corollary, I would contend that the transformation of the veterans' associations has also changed the attitude of society towards veterans. War and military service become the only activities the former soldiers are identified with, and they do not obtain any other opportunities for future development. At the same time, the ubiquity of military propaganda and incessant presence of war-related activities have had a significant role in normalizing war and violence. According to Anne Le Huérou and Elizabeth Sieca-Kozlowski, sociologists studying the consequences of the war in Chechnya, these programmes diffuse throughout Russian society a culture of violence that veterans carry within and consider their heritage.<sup>169</sup>

Le Huérou and Sieca-Kozlowski also suppose that the patriotic education programmes have another function for the Russian government, besides the transmission of patriotic values. They also federate veterans around the central authorities and under the government's control, "keep them busy" and channel their potential aggression.<sup>170</sup> To some extent patriotic programmes replace programmes of psychological rehabilitation of military personnel, which are more or less non-existent in Russia. As my informant Vyacheslav phrased it, until a veteran is invited to speak in schools, he would not feel himself needed.

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<sup>169</sup> A. Le Huerou, E. Sieca-Kozlowski, "'Chechen Syndrome'? Russian Veterans of the Chechen War and the Transposition of War Violence to Society", *War Veterans in Postwar Situations: Chechnya, Serbia, Turkey, and Côte d'Ivoire*. New York; Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p.41.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

## Conclusion



**Figure 1.** Orthodox Church of the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>1</sup>

In June 2020, the Ministry of Defence opened the Orthodox Church of the Russian Armed Forces in the Patriot Park complex at Kubinka. The church was dedicated to “The 75th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War Victory and All the Martial Feats of the Russian People”.<sup>2</sup> It is huge, bizarrely symbolic (the diameter of the main dome is 19.45 metres, in honour of the year 1945), painted in khaki colours, and with an overt propagandistic function. At first, it was planned to decorate the church with a mosaic of Vladimir Putin, Sergei Shoigu (the Defence Minister) and Valentina Matvienko; later (after the first idea had been abandoned) with one of Joseph Stalin. This, too, was abandoned after protests from the Russian Orthodox Church, but the iconography in the final building remains in many ways more secular than religious.

<sup>1</sup> The photo was initially published at S. Walker, “Angels and Artillery: a Cathedral to Russia's New National Identity”, *The Guardian*, 20 October 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/20/orthodox-cathedral-of-the-armed-force-russian-national-identity-military-disneyland>>, accessed 22 May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> The church’s official website is at <<https://hram.mil.ru/>>, accessed 10 October 2020.

I visited the church at a summer weekend in 2021, when it was full of visitors. Groups of school children had been brought as part of their patriotic education courses; families were choosing souvenirs in a church shop (military uniform for toddlers, glasses with the Soviet coat of arms, compasses with a portrait of Stalin, wooden or paper models of tanks or keychains made from bullets);<sup>3</sup> children were playing in trenches in a simulated front line next to the church. Gunshot from a nearby shooting range mixed up with the sounds of a service being transmitted from loudspeakers.

The interior of the church was also painted in khaki, with the floors made from weapons and tanks seized from Nazi Germany. Stained glass windows were decorated with Imperial Russian and Soviet military medals so the light was falling from the church's dome through Soviet red stars. The walls of the main hall of the church are covered with mosaics depicting battle scenes with religious associations: an icon of the Holy Virgin helps Russian troops in the Great Northern War; the Holy Virgin miraculously appears to Russian troops during the First World War; a procession with an icon of Our Lady of Kazan takes place in besieged Leningrad. The three main, biggest mosaics are dedicated to the main events of the Great Patriotic War and the last one to the local wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This mosaic depicts soldiers dressed in the uniforms of the Afghan and Chechen wars, with their machine guns pointed at the ground, their eyes turned to the viewer, and two angels flying over their heads. Under the mosaic is a list of the wars Russia has participated in over the past 70 years. The list occupies four lines and includes wars in Korea, Laos, Algeria, Yemen, Vietnam, "fulfilment of international duty in Afghanistan", "the pacification of Georgia", "fighting international terrorism in Syria", "the reunification of Crimea and Russia" and many others. Half of the line at the end of the list was left blank. The space was enough for at least three

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<sup>3</sup> The full range is on the website <<https://patriotp.ru/uslugi/magazin/podarochnaya-produktsiya/?ysclid=1392nji8hw>>, accessed 14 May 2022.

more wars. In this church, the possibility of future wars was so evident that the empty line didn't look like a threat, just sensible forward planning.



**Figure 2.** A mosaic depicting recent conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

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My study has been dedicated to the people depicted on the mosaic, soldiers of the local wars waged by Russia in recent times. I have focused on veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, although some of my informants also took part in other military campaigns with the Russian Army or as mercenaries. In my study, I have examined the destinies and career paths of these serving soldiers after the end of the wars; the means they have used to give meaning to their army past; the myths and resentments they share; and the enduring significance of military values in civilian life. I have also examined the state's attitudes to these wars and the veteran communities and how it has shifted from hostility and fear to instrumentalization of

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<sup>4</sup> The photo was initially published at S. Walker, "Angels and Artillery".

the veterans and inscription of them into the work of nation-building, as is shown symbolically on the wall of the church.

I have argued that from the middle of the 2000s, the Russian state started using the local wars (together with the Great Patriotic War) to instill patriotic sentiment and reinforce the militarization of Russian society. For this, it has transformed the official discourses relating to these wars and collective memory of them; from unnecessary and unwise campaigns ending in defeat, they have become glorious and just victories. Alongside promoting this historical PR campaign, the state has started manipulating veterans of these wars, involving them (partly through the system of governmental funding, partly giving them recognition and respect which they saw as long overdue) in the system of patriotic education of youth and into a wide variety of state rallies. From despised and potentially dangerous outcasts suffering from “Afghan syndrome”, the state has turned veterans into a pillar of the regime. Veterans’ organizations in their turn have obtained state permission to exercise leverage and been transformed into a new state power structure.

As I have shown, the veterans’ community welcomed these changes. For them, the narrative of their prominence and heroism, which they had preserved in their groups all these years, suddenly became canonical. Arguably, the triumph of the soldiers was overshadowed by the fact that they once again found themselves serving the state. However, military service is perceived in terms of “duty to the nation”, and, as I have shown, ex-combatants preserved their military ethos in civilian life. The military identity cannot exist by itself; it needs permanent external legitimation, which, in this case, was provided by the militarized Russian state. Thus, communities of the veterans were ready to continue their service, offering to the state their loyalty, participation in patriotic mobilization and the establishment of a network of support for government initiatives.

Veterans’ unions that had begun as grassroots ventures also passed through substantial changes. Some were closed, others merged into big organizations with official state funding.

At the beginning of the 2010s, they switched from social work (the primary reason why they were established to begin with) to the promotion of ideology. I claim that by supporting and funding veterans' unions, the state has obtained a new loyal and united structure that can be used for both propaganda and enforcement goals. Conversely, the dependence on military veterans for the achievement of key state goals has contributed to the overall institutionalization and routinization of violence, since veterans regard violence as the measure of true manliness and cannot conceive of a social identity to which violence is not central.

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In my Introduction, I established key research questions: how exactly did the veterans become one of the powers supporting the regime? And in what ways do we as a society experience the shifts in social norms, conventions and public discourses brought about by former soldiers? In Chapter 1, I addressed this question by highlighting the story of relations between veterans of the war in Afghanistan, society and the state throughout the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. I argued that in the 1990s, the state disengaged from interacting with veterans of the war in Afghanistan, not willing to be associated with the inglorious invasion waged by the Soviet authorities. The ex-soldiers were not able to accept this marginalization, and started presenting themselves as victims, betrayed by the state to which they had always been loyal and which they considered responsible for their wellbeing. While the state provided no direct financial support to veterans, it granted them various fiscal concessions, allowing ex-soldiers to organize small-scale private enterprises. Their participation in business, in the conditions of 1990s "wild capitalism", ended up with the establishment of different mafia groups, gang wars and the growing hostility of society.

After President Vladimir Putin came to power, the narrative of the local wars was changed, and the veterans found themselves involved in the new campaign of militarization. They were presented as heroes, respected for their self-sacrifice and brotherhood, and defenders of the homeland.

Chapter 2 looked at the post-conflict itineraries of the veterans of two Chechen wars and demonstrated how public discourses of these wars also have evolved. At first, after the end of these wars, their participants were left in social isolation. As in the case of afgantsy previously, society was afraid of a potentially violent and traumatized population group, and the veterans felt themselves in social isolation. Where veterans of the Afghan war had been able to create enterprises, if often illegal ones, chechentsy became soldiers of fortune, mercenaries or policemen; many Chechen generals came to power, fostering the militarization of political elites. Soon, the permeation of the police by veterans led to a rise in the use of violence in policing; hostile “clean-up” operations started appearing in police stations in many Russian cities.

When the wave of patriotic mobilization started, narratives of the Chechen wars were modified. Chechen veterans were told that they were fighting against international terrorism, and were as united and courageous as their Afghan counterparts. Ex-combatants willingly interiorized this new discourse.

In Chapter 3, I highlight the consequences of the wars and precisely how military violence has shifted from the frontline to civilian life. I look at how the local wars have influenced the definition of masculinity and the idea of a “real man”. I hypothesize that the new militaristic rhetoric and patriotic mobilization of the 2010s caused a rise in militaristic masculinity. The army was again accorded the status of a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, and the image of a father-warrior, a veteran of the Great Patriotic War, became the ideal image of a masculine man. This situation has become actualized even more with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and allusions in state Russian propaganda to grandfathers fighting fascism exactly as contemporary soldiers do.

As my fieldwork showed, ex-combatants consider soldiers the only real men and military service the only (and the obligatory) method of male initiation. Thereby, the war becomes the ultimate test of manhood and way of obtaining masculinity. It comes to be understood as an

everyday situation driven by the need to survive and preserve the life of brothers-in-arms, with violence as a primary tool and integral daily practice, devoid of moral implications.

In Chapter 4, I return to the topic of how ex-soldiers are instrumentalized by the modern state and show how they have become a tool for the militarization of society. I look at how, with the revival of patriotism-based state ideology, veterans' alliances have become an integral part of all “patriotic” events and actions. Participation in school “lessons of courage” or paramilitary camps have given former combatants a renewed sense of political and social relevance, yet at the same time have further marginalized them, isolating them from society and preventing them from building new civil identities. Patriotic education also plays a significant role in normalizing violence and spreading it throughout Russian society.

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**Figure 3.** A performance by Afghan veterans in a Yekaterinburg military hospital for soldiers wounded in Ukraine<sup>5</sup>

Gradually, from a country with extensive patriotic mobilization and militarization of public discourses, Russia has evolved into a state waging a full-scale war with the second-largest

<sup>5</sup> The photograph from “15 aprelya poety, muzykanty Evgenii Buntov i Gennadii Kunjavskii proveli kontsert pered ranennymi voynami v gospihale TSVO”, RSVA official website, 16 April 2022. <<http://rsva-ural.ru/2022/04/15-aprelja-poehity-muzykanty-evgenijj-buntov-i-gennadiij-kunjavskijj-proveli-koncert-pered-ranennymi-voynami-v-gospitale-cvo/>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

country in Europe. When I started working on this thesis, a future military campaign did not look too realistic a prospect, but with each year of my fieldwork, the level of militarization even of my informants was growing; they were talking about future military threats more persistently; their hope that their military experience would be needed in future increased.

During the current war, the Russian authorities have taken into account the mistakes of the first Chechen war. Even though conscripts are actively used in Ukraine,<sup>6</sup> the authorities rarely acknowledge this, so as not to cause a negative attitude towards hostilities, as was the case during the first Chechen war. The number of casualties is carefully concealed; there is evidence that some bodies have not been brought back to Russia, and when they are, fallen soldiers are buried in their native towns and villages without big public attention, one by one, as was the practice during the second Chechen war. Coverage is left to local newspapers and websites, and bereaved relatives (who are reportedly made to sign non-disclosure agreements) feel totally isolated. Even the movement of soldiers' mothers has not been able to unite the families of soldiers. My informant Valentina Melnikova (Committee of Soldiers' Mothers) now laments about the lack of readiness of soldiers' mothers to publicly protest or to take their sons from the army, as happened during the Chechen wars.<sup>7</sup> The crackdown on NGOs in the 2010s is one disincentive to mobilization; another is the severity of sentences for criticizing the "military operation" or the conduct of the army.

The beginning of the invasion of Ukraine caused elation in the community of veterans. All the military alliances mentioned in this thesis supported the new war.<sup>8</sup> In an official statement of the RSVA, its head Franz Klintsevich called the invasion to Ukraine the war with the global

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<sup>6</sup> "Rossiya priznala, chto v Ukraine voyuyut prizyvnikhi. Vsego chetyre dnya nazad Putin eto otritsal", *Meduza*, 9 March 2022. <<https://meduza.io/short/2022/03/09/rossiya-priznala-chto-v-ukraine-voyuyut-prizyvnikhi-vsego-chetyre-dnya-nazad-putin-eto-otrivals?ysclid=13ahkd4614>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

<sup>7</sup> "Rossiiskaya pravozashchitnitsa: my govorili, chto RF poidet voinoi na Ukrainu, no ni odna s\*kina doch' ne zabrala svoego syna", *Obozrevatel*, 25 March 2022. <<https://news.obozrevatel.com/society/rossijskaya-pravozaschitnitsa-myi-govorili-chto-rf-pojdet-vojnoj-na-ukrainu-no-ni-odna-skina-doch-ne-zabrala-svoego-syina.htm>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Yudina, "Afgantsy i veterani podderzhali deistviya Rossii v situatsii s Donbassom", *Vzglyad*, 24 February 2022. <<https://vz.ru/news/2022/2/24/1145448.html?>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

West that he and his comrades had been preparing for over the last 30 years: “30 лет беспринципного обмана России Западом завершены. Запад не хочет признавать наши права, а Россия больше никогда не согласится на то, чтобы её мнение игнорировали, чтобы её граждан считали людьми второго сорта. Мы вернули себе силу державы, с которой будут считаться, нравится это или не нравится кому бы ни было. Настало время всё назвать своими именами: США и их союзники хотят уничтожить нашу страну.”<sup>9</sup>

The head of Battle Brotherhood, Boris Gromov, published an appeal to the community of Afghan veterans living in Ukraine, in which he rhetorically asked why they closed their eyes to the fascism of their country and also called the invasion a war with the West: “И мы, и вы прекрасно понимаем, что Украина для США, ЕС и НАТО – пустое место. Она для них просто инструмент. И через него они готовы развязать новую войну, чтобы разгромить нас.”<sup>10</sup> The head of the Battle Brotherhood directly accused Ukrainian veterans of condoning fascism and genocide. His speech showed that contemporary Afghan brotherhood is a nation-building myth, something quite different from “friendship of peoples” back before 1991.

Veterans rushed to take part in mobilization under the “Z” symbol (originally a field marker for Russian tanks and armoured vehicles, later a nationwide pro-war “brand”). Branches of RSVA throughout Russia held motor rallies called “За мир без нацизма”.<sup>11</sup> My informant Yevgeny, who used to sing military songs and play his hurdy-gurdy at a Russian military base in Syria and at schools in his home city of Yekaterinburg, now plays in hospitals for soldiers

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<sup>9</sup> “Zayavlenie Rossiiskogo Soyuza veteranov Afganistana o situatsii na Donbasse”, RSVA official website, 24 February 2022. <<https://rsva.ru/tpost/1ii600ljo1-zayavlenie-rossiiskogo-soyuza-veteranov>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

<sup>10</sup> “Obrashchenie generala Gromova B.V. k tovarishcham’afgantsam’ Ukrainy”, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 7 March 2022. <<https://rg.ru/2022/03/07/obrashchenie-general-gromova-bv-k-tovarishcham-afgancam-ukrainy.html?>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

<sup>11</sup> “Avtoprobeg ‘Za mir bez natsizma!’: Veterany-‘afgantsy’ Sverdlovskoi oblasti prisoedinilis' k vserossiiskoi aktsii”, RSVA official website, 26 April 2022. <<http://rsva-ural.ru/2022/04/avtoprobeg-za-mir-bez-nacizma-veterany-afgancy-sverdlovskojj-oblasti-prisoedinilis-k-vserossijskojj-akcii/>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

wounded in Ukraine. According to news on the RSVA website, Yevgeny also invites these soldiers to join veterans' organizations.<sup>12</sup> Most likely, military unions again, as in 2014 and 2015, have begun to work as recruitment centres for dispatching soldiers to Ukraine.

While I would not argue that the work of military alliances did much to bring the outbreak of war closer, I am convinced that they helped create internal support for the invasion, and contributed to the spread of militarized rhetoric, the militarization of society and the routinization of violence. Because of the effective propaganda networks already built up by the alliances, their activities guaranteed the state that the war would receive public support in Russian society and would be promoted throughout the country.

At the micro-level, the war gave veterans a sense that their experience and knowledge were finally in demand. The social networks of my informants are filled with news from Russian official mass media about the war and photographs of them at rallies promoting it. I avoid asking their opinion directly now, remembering that for them I am a representative of a university from a NATO country which Russia has officially added to the list of "unfriendly countries".<sup>13</sup>

As historian Emily Hoge notes, the story of how the veterans' movement transformed from an anti-war movement of disgruntled veterans into the ultranationalist cheerleader for the war in Ukraine provides important context for understanding the larger political mood in Russia regarding the invasion. The same feelings of resentment and betrayal that first sparked the veterans' movement have also come to shape the ideology of the Russian state.<sup>14</sup> The state too has travelled the path from categorical rejection of war – "*Никогда больше*" – to gleeful anticipation – "*Можем повторить*" – in just two decades.

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<sup>12</sup> "15 aprelya poety, muzykanty Evgenii Buntov i Gennadii Kunyavskii proveli kontsert".

<sup>13</sup> "Pravitel'stvo utverdilo perechen' nedruzhestvennykh Rossii stran", *RIA Novosti*, 7 March 2022. <<https://ria.ru/20220307/perechen-1777030742.html?>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

<sup>14</sup> E. Hoge, "The Legacy of the Soviet Afghan War and Its Role in the Ukrainian Invasion", *LawFare Blog*, 25 April 2022. <<https://www.lawfareblog.com/legacy-soviet-afghan-war-and-its-role-ukrainian-invasion>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

## Goals for Future Research



**Figure 4.** The opening of branches of Russian youth patriotic organizations in Ukrainian city of Mariupol after its occupation by the Russian army. Photos published in the Battle Brotherhood website depict gloomy women and children surrounded by young men dressed in t-shirts and sweatshirts with the patriotic organizations' emblems.<sup>15</sup>

Like the blank line in the Orthodox Church of the Army, left for a list of current and future wars, this thesis also leaves many gaps for future research. Within the framework of a single dissertation, it is impossible to cover all aspects of the military ethos, the veteran movement, and the violence caused by local wars. Besides, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised new questions. For example, the question of how Russia evolved from a country with extensive patriotic mobilization and militarization of public discourses into a state waging a full-scale war, requires extensive future research.

In addition, I see several main directions for future analysis not directly connected with the current war in Ukraine. Firstly, this should relate to the study of places of memory and manners

<sup>15</sup> “V Mariupole otkryty otdeleniya ‘Volonterskoi rot’y’, ‘Molodoi gvardii’ i ‘Yunarmii’”, Boevoe Bratstvo website, 11 May 2022. <<https://bbratstvo.com/foto/2022/05/11/v-mariupole-otkryty-otdeleniya-volonterskoy-rot-y-molodoy-gvardii-i-yunarmii>>, accessed 22 May 2022.

of commemorating the local wars in Russia. Just like the veterans' unions, initiatives to create memorials originally emerged as grassroots initiatives. For example, the main monuments in Moscow and Yekaterinburg, “Grieving Mothers” by architect Vadim Sidur and “Black Tulip” by Andrey Serov, were opened in 1992 and 1995, respectively, on the initiative of the local Afghan communities. At the same time, veterans' communities opened museums of the Afghan war in both cities (and in several others, including Tver, Chelyabinsk and Tula). They were all created and financed by former soldiers; however, in the mid-2000s, veterans were no longer able to finance museums and passed them to the city administrations. I hypothesize that the same type of annexation of memory has happened; the original anti-war narrative in the museums was gradually replaced by the state militaristic one. The design of the museums has remained the same, but the texts of excursions have changed. It is an interesting question whether the curators and managers of the museums actually noticed this happening, and indeed, consciously contributed to it.

In this thesis I have focused exclusively on institutionalized violence in society generally. But another pressing question is the role of domestic violence in the families of ex-combatants. An obvious hypothesis is that soldiers who have become accustomed to resorting to violence during a war, and often later while working in security or paramilitary structures, turn to it in their private lives too. I was unable to find any research on domestic violence in the families of Russian military personnel. However, even before the current Russian invasion of Ukraine started, I had found publications dedicated to an increase in domestic violence in families of Ukrainian soldiers returning from the zone of the anti-terrorist operation in Donbass.<sup>16</sup> I assume that the level of domestic violence in Russia is no lower (and perhaps the reverse), but the topic is simply not discussed publicly. It is easy to presume that the current war will cause a surge in

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example: “Vtoroi front: kak veterany ATO obostrili problem domashnego nasiliya”, *Antikor*, 3 May 2018. <[https://antikor.com.ua/articles/235627-vtoroj\\_front\\_kak\\_veterany\\_ato\\_obostrili\\_problemu\\_domashnego\\_nasilija](https://antikor.com.ua/articles/235627-vtoroj_front_kak_veterany_ato_obostrili_problemu_domashnego_nasilija)>, accessed 17 May 2022.

domestic violence, but this development is likely to be understudied, just as happened with previous wars.<sup>17</sup>

During my fieldwork, I could not address this topic specifically. Access to the families of my informants and permission to interview their family members would have taken far more time than I had at my disposal. However, even the narratives of my informants regarding their family life and their perceptions of women (which I look at in Chapter 3) reveal intensely patriarchal family structures of the kind that would make violence permissible or even laudable.

If more research is needed on the veterans whom I discuss here, it will certainly also be needed on the new veterans of the Ukraine war. In the first month after the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian authorities announced that the participants in this war would receive the status of combat veterans and all the corresponding social benefits.<sup>18</sup> The experience of recent local wars shows that none of the generations of war veterans in fact obtained social benefits easily. In Chapter 2, I look at how soldiers who fought in Chechnya stormed military enlistment offices in order to receive combat payments. In her interview with me, the Head of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers Valentina Melnikova said that the parents of some soldiers who died in Chechnya are still suing the Russian state, trying to receive their sons' pensions. This is also an area where infighting among successive groups of veterans has been a significant factor. My Afghan informants were negative about the fact that the status of veterans had been assigned to the soldiers of the Chechen wars, believing that, firstly, this reduced the status of veterans generally, and secondly, reduced the amount of budget money available for them.

How the status of new veterans will be established; how people whom I study will relate to the new veterans; and how the attitude of the state and society towards them will change, are interesting and fruitful topics, the outlines of which can only be tentatively imagined so far. But

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<sup>17</sup> Human rights workers and psychologists are already expecting an outbreak of violence in families of Russian soldiers. See for example: “Chto budet, kogda soldaty vernutsya domoi”, *Podcast “Bol'she vsekh nado”*, 21 April 2022. <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tsDu8H0vbs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tsDu8H0vbs)>, accessed 15 May 2022.

<sup>18</sup> “Federal'nyi zakon ot 26 marta 2022 g. N 69-FZ ‘O vnesenii izmeneniya v Federal'nyi zakon ‘O veteranakh’”, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, no. 65(8713), 28 March 2022, <<https://rg.ru/2022/03/28/veteran-dok.html?>>, accessed 17 May 2022.

I hope that my research will provide a framework in which future researchers will be able to analyze the veterans of this current invasion, and my findings will help to understand the relations between the state, society and veterans that they uncover.

## List of Informants

**Ahmed** was born in Makhachkala in 1969. Dagestani, completed secondary education. Served in Afghanistan in 1987-1989. A former mercenary (fought in military conflicts in Nagorny Karabakh, Abkhazia, Chechnya). Currently leads a small security agency.

Was interviewed in Leninkent (republic of Dagestan) 11 September 2019.

**Aleksandr** was born in Bryansk in 1966. Russian, received higher education. Served in Afghanistan in 1983-1986. In 2000-2011 was leading an NGO *Disabled Veterans of Wars and Military Conflicts*. Currently works as a bus driver and runs a small business.

Was interviewed in Bryansk 23 September 2020.

**Aleksei** was born in Moscow in 1973. Russian, completed secondary education. A former riot policeman and a serviceman. Since the beginning of the Second Chechen War in 1999 and until 2007 was serving in Chechnya. Works as a parachute tester in the Scientific Research Institute of Parachute Construction.

Was interviewed in Moscow 23 August 2019.

**Ali** born in Leninaul (republic of Dagestan) in 1968. Dagestani, completed secondary education. Served in Afghanistan in 1986-1988. A former school teacher. Leads a local veterans' organization and a school museum of the Afghan war.

Was interviewed in Leninaul 6 and 9 October 2019.

**Aman** was born in 1970 in Leninaul. Dagestani, received secondary education. Since 1991, has been serving in the riot police; he participated in both the wars in Chechnya and in the so-called Dagestan war, an invasion of Islamist groups into Dagestan from Chechnya in 1999.

Was interviewed in Leninaul 5 September 2019.

**Andrei** was born in 1970 in Nizhniy Tagil. Russian, received specialized secondary education. Served in Afghanistan in 1983-1985. Organized and leads a *Centre for Social Services for Combat Veterans* in Nizhniy Tagil. Since 2004, leads the Nizhny Tagil branch of the federal Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan.

Was interviewed in Nizhniy Tagil 14 September 2021.

**Bulat** was born in Mamadysh (Tatarstan) in 1963. Tatar, received higher education. Served in Afghanistan in 1982-1984 and was invalided out of the army after four serious injuries. Leads an NGO for disabled veterans of the Afghan war *Bulat*.

Was interviewed in Chelyabinsk 18 September 2021.

**Eva** was born in Makhachkala in 1950. Dagestani, received secondary education. Worked as a waitress and then a canteen manager on a Soviet military base in Afghanistan in 1986-1989. Currently works as a bartender.

Was interviewed in Makhachkala 15 September 2019.

**Mikhail Svintsov** was born in Bryansk in 1976. Russian, received higher education. Works as a head of the Young Patriots Movement. In 2014, was fighting in Ukrainian Donbass as part of pro-Russian militias.

Was interviewed in Bryansk 23 September 2020.

**Nadirbek** was born in Leninaul (republic of Dagestan) in 1961. Dagestani, completed secondary education. Served in Afghanistan in 1979-1981. Worked as a water-bailiff.

Was interviewed in Khasavyurt (republic of Dagestan) 7 October 2019.

**Natalia** was born in Nizhny Tagil in 1975. Russian, received higher education. Since 2016, is working as a psychologist in the *Centre for Social Services for Combat Veterans* in Nizhny Tagil.

Was interviewed in Nizhny Tagil 16 September 2021.

**Nikolai** was born in the town of Pochep (Bryansk region) in 1966. Russian, completed specialized secondary education. Served in Afghanistan in 1984-1985 and was invalided out of the army because of a heavy injury. Works as a businessmen.

Was interviewed in Bryansk 24 September 2020.

**Oksana Kozlova** was born in Bryansk in 1977. Russian, received higher education. Works as a headteacher, a head of a school museum and a literature and Russian language teacher in the Kolyudovskaya secondary school.

Was interviewed in Bryansk 24 September 2020.

**Ravshan** was born in Makhachkala in 1968. Dagestani, completed specialized secondary education. Served in Afghanistan in 1986-1988. Works as a taxi driver.

Was interviewed in Makhachkala 11 September 2019.

**Rinat** was born in 1966 in Nizhny Tagil. Tatar, completed secondary education. Served in Afghanistan in 1987-1988. As an officer, participated in Soviet military operations during the Osh riots (Kirgiz SSR, 1990), Black Saturday (a violent crackdown on the civilian population in Baku, Azerbaijan SSR, 1990). Since 1992, served in Tajikistan during the civil war and in Chechnya during the second military campaign. Currently a staff member at the

Odintsovo Local History Museum and the author of the museum's display dedicated to local wars.

Was interviewed in Odintsovo 8 October 2020.

**Roman** was born in Bryansk in 1972. Russian, completed secondary education. Served in Nagorno Karabakh in 1989-1990. A former mercenary (fought in the both Chechen wars). Currently retired and practically disabled.

Was interviewed in Bryansk 25 September 2020.

**Sergei** was born in Moscow in 1961. Russian, received specialized secondary education. A former riot policeman. Served in Chechnya in 1995. Currently retires, works as a school guard.

Was interviewed in Moscow 24 August 2019.

**Sergei** was born in Blagoveshchensk in 1965. Russian, received higher military education. Since 1995, served in the first and then second Chechen wars. Works as a deputy general director in a security firm.

Was interviewed in Tver 6 August 2021.

**Shamil** was born in Makhachkala in 1965. Dagestani, received secondary education. Served in Afghanistan in 1983-1985. Worked in Interior Ministry Special Forces and took part in both of the military campaigns in Chechnya.

Was interviewed in Makhachkala 11 September 2019.

**Umizhat** was born in Khubar (Republic of Dagestan) in 1957. Avar, received specialized secondary education. Worked as a surgical nurse in a Soviet military hospital in Afghanistan in 1984-1986. After coming back from the war, continued working as a nurse.

Was interviewed in Kaspiysk (Republic of Dagestan) 13 September 2029.

**Vitaliy** was born in Bryansk in 1983. Russian, completed specialized secondary education. Served in Chechnya in 1998-1999. Works as a businessman, participates in numerous activities of local veterans' organizations.

Was interviewed in Bryansk 27 September 2020.

**Vladimir** was born in Moscow in 1955. Russian, completed higher education. Served in Afghanistan in 1985-1989. Former military pilot. Currently – a businessman and a head of a veterans' district organization.

Was interviewed in Moscow 4 October 2019.

**Vladimir** was born in Bryansk in 1962. Russian, completed high education. After studying Farsi at an institute of oriental studies, was sent to Afghanistan and served in Kabul and Herat as a military interpreter in 1986-1988. Senior lieutenant. Currently leads the Bezhitsk district branch of the Bryansk regional organization of the Union of Afghan Veterans. Works as a businessman.

Was interviewed in Bryansk 22 September 2020.

**Vyacheslav** was born in Dolbotovo village (Bryansk region) in 1961. Russian, completed higher education. Served in Afghanistan in 1979-1981. Works in Bryansk Traffic Department and serves as a Bryansk Regional Duma deputy and a head of a local War Invalids' Organization.

Was interviewed in Bryansk 24 September 2020.

**Yevgeny** was born in Shalya (Sverdlovsk region) in 1966. Cossack, received higher education. Served in Afghanistan in 1985-1987. Since 1995, leads a patriotic association Cultural Centre *Soldiers of Russia*. A board member of the federal Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan. Published three books of poetry and numerous musical albums. Most of the poems and songs are dedicated to the war in Afghanistan and patriotism (understood in accordance with the state discourse). Starring in several movies, including *Cargo 300* (1989) where he plays the main character, an afganets.

Was interviewed in Yekaterinburg 8 September 2021.

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