

Fighting Words and Images

Representing War across the
Disciplines

EDITED BY ELENA V. BARABAN,
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8 Exchange of Sacrifices: Symbolizing an Unpopular War in Post-Soviet Russia

SERGUEI ALEX. OUSHAKINE

Russia does not pay us much – in money or in glory
But we are Russia's only soldiers.
Hence we must hold out, until the very death.
Forward! Forward! Forward!

Trofim, a popular singer

Introduction

The Chechen war became one of the most vivid representations of the political and social chaos that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. To a large degree, the war was an unexpected outcome of the fight for independence that had started in Chechnya in the early 1990s. At the time, Boris Yeltsin's government was capable of neither negotiating with the pro-independence forces in Chechnya nor suppressing them. Apparently misinformed by his advisors about the possibility of defeating heavily armed Chechen rebels, in December 1994 Yeltsin began a military campaign aimed at 'restoring the constitutional order' in Chechnya (see figure 8.1).

Since then, the war has gone through a series of stages. A comprehensive ceasefire achieved in August of 1996 was followed in 1999 by a new period of a large-scale fighting. After 2001 the military component of the war was gradually scaled down: massive fights were replaced by episodic armed conflicts between isolated groups of Chechen fighters and professional troops staged by the Russian government in the region.

The war exposed the least attractive features of the new Russian state:



8.1 A bullet-ridden poster from the 1996 presidential election campaign. The line on the poster reads, 'Choose with your heart.' Vladimir Bykov, a Chechen war veteran who took this picture in June 1996 in Serjen-Yurt, Chechnya, provided his own title: *Our beloved president*. Courtesy of the photographer.

its cruelty, its indifference, and its lack of responsibility. War is never an organized event, and the history of every generation of war veterans is always one of trauma, confusion, and disillusionment. Yet the Chechen war, like the Korean and Vietnam wars in the United States, added to these veterans' traumatic biographies a profound feeling of being betrayed – by the Russian state, by the military leadership, by the general public. Decidedly unpopular among Russia's citizens, the war nonetheless caused little opposition. Yet, unlike other mass-scale military operations conducted by the Soviet government, for instance, in Afghanistan, the Chechen war from the very beginning was marked by legal, political, ideological, and moral ambiguity. As a result, the task of framing the Chechen war in a language understandable for a larger audience was left to the soldiers drafted to participate in the unpopular war.

Unlike Soviet veterans of previous wars, whose post-war legal status had been determined by special laws, participants in the Chechen war had no legal framework that could outline or even clarify their post-war status, rights, and entitlements. Technically speaking, the war in Chechnya has never been officially classified as a war. From the legal point of view this military campaign was a limited 'anti-terrorist operation' in the North Caucasus. Correspondingly, there were no war veterans produced by the conflict. Chechen war veterans were officially classified as 'participants in combat activities' and were not eligible for the statewide subsidies or assistance available to veterans of previous wars and military conflicts.

Given the uncertainty with which the Chechen war was presented in the Russian media, it is perhaps understandable that very few servicemen used the war as a ground for substantive criticism of the state's military policy. Unlike mandatory drafted soldiers, senior officers had more freedom in expressing their opinions, but even they exercised this freedom very rarely. Some officers approached the war as an opportunity, making some money on the side by selling arms and soldiers; few resigned quietly. The majority of Russia's higher officers preferred to follow orders silently, ignoring the increasing number of the dead and injured civilians and soldiers. There was no equivalent of Vietnam Veterans against the War in Russia. Nor was there anything comparable to the investigations through which American veterans ('winter soldiers') challenged the U.S. military and civic authorities in 1971.¹ A possible anti-war stance as a way to create a *post-war* identity was replaced by a different symbolic framework: demobilized soldiers increasingly

couched their appeals for public recognition and monetary assistance in the language of exchange. At times, this uneasy attempt to establish an economic equivalent of patriotic values produced unexpected results: veterans' search for recognition of their financial and social entitlements implicitly pushed the state to define the war in Chechnya in legal and political terms.

Using interviews with veterans of the Chechen war and war-related materials that I collected during my fieldwork in Barnaul (Altai region, Siberia) during 2001–3 and later visits in 2004–5, in this essay I want to explore how military experience and identity are constructed and represented in veterans' post-war life. More specifically, I am interested in understanding those rhetorical moves and tropes that allowed Chechen war veterans to frame their war past in terms of business exchanges with the state. War activity emerged here, I shall argue, as a peculiar form of entrepreneurship, with suffering being a main commodity transacted between Chechen veterans and the state.

'Article 0' of the Constitution

In January 2005, a regional court of the Orel province in central Russia overturned the previous decision of a lower court that had obliged the Ministry of Defence to provide a pension and financial compensation to Gennadi Uminskii, a retired ensign. In 1996 he was severely wounded while performing contracted military service for the Ministry of Defence in Chechnya. As the new court decision concluded, 'war conditions' made it impossible to determine 'the real agent of harm.' Therefore, there was 'no ground for any claim about the state's responsibility for injuries and disabilities incurred.'²

As a contract serviceman, Uminskii had participated in a particularly bloody battle when Grozny, Chechnya's capital, was stormed by federal troops in August 1996. On 6 August 1996, with his platoon positioned outside Grozny, Uminskii (with 202 other servicemen) was ordered to unblock several checkpoints in the city's downtown and to rescue several journalists as well as a general captured by the rebels. As soon as the platoon entered the city, the soldiers were encircled. Most of them were killed on the spot, yet fifty managed to survive, hiding in a ruined building nearby. Despite the rebels' repeated demands that they surrender, the soldiers continued to fight back, turning the building into a defence ground. On 10 August 1996, however, the besieged soldiers were startled by a radio news report: their commanders had

announced an official mourning service to commemorate the annihilated platoon. As the soldiers learned later, the regiment's bureaucracy had even issued official 'funeral letters' (*pokhoronki*) to inform the soldiers' relatives about their deaths. Although all the besieged soldiers were seriously wounded, not all of them were killed. Some managed to stay in the building for several weeks until a ceasefire between Russia and Chechnya, signed on 31 August 1996, effectively stopped the first Chechen war (December 1994–August 1996) and put an end to their defence post's blockade.³

Having survived the siege, Uminskii spent the next year in hospitals, recovering from concussion and shell shock. He was released in 1998 with a diagnosis that allows for very limited employment under medical supervision.⁴ Uminskii's attempts to secure a pension from the Ministry of Defence failed. As he learned, his original contract with the ministry had been voided due to his 'prolonged absence.' Moreover, his military division was disbanded, and in the local office of the Ministry of Defence in Orel, his hometown, he was informed that the person listed under his name was still 'missing in action.'⁵

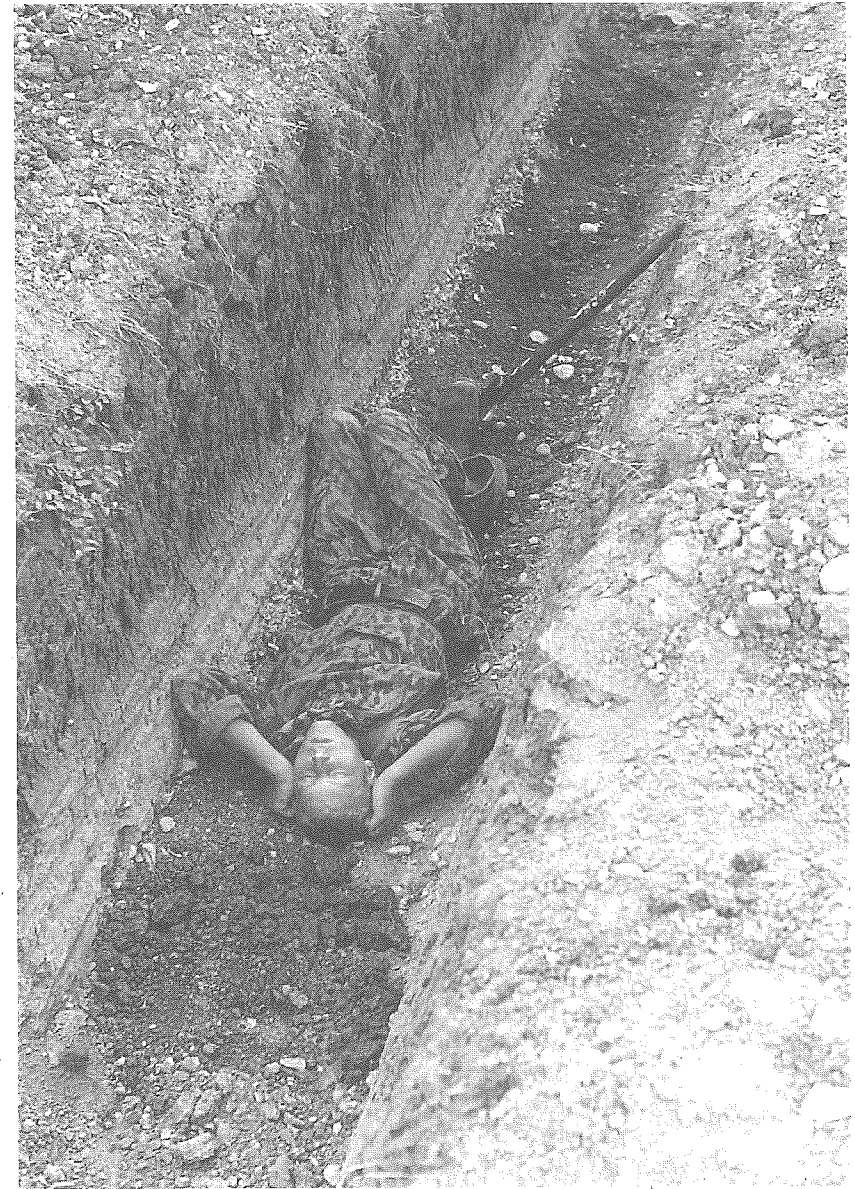
Uminskii's case is a good example of the legal and political uncertainty that has been associated with the Chechen war. *Krasnaia Zvezda* (Red star), the official newspaper of the Ministry of Defence, bitterly pointed out that it was not just the ministry that should be held responsible. Taken aback by the fact that the ministry was being sued for compensation, the paper insisted that it was 'the duty of the whole state to take care of the people who defended its territorial integrity.'⁶ This deflection of responsibility through splitting the ministry from the 'whole state' is revealing. Indeed, the Chechen war has been first of all a political event, not a military one. Memoirs and interviews of Russian soldiers and generals replay this theme even more strongly. As officers claim, the army was used as a tool in a political game, used irresponsibly and unjustifiably to carry out a humanitarian and military disaster. A commandant of the Russian troops in Chechnya, for instance, complained to a popular magazine in 1996: 'The army, the interior troops, the police never do anything because of their own desire or will. They follow orders ... It is a shame, it is a pity ... that nobody has any idea what our army, our people, our guys are dying for.'⁷

In 2002, in the midst of the second stage of the Chechen war (1999–), the situation was not that different. By that time the question 'What are our guys dying for?' was toned down, and the army switched from relying on largely untrained conscripts to using contracted vol-

unteers, reservists, and professionally trained military. However, this move changed relatively little; new forms of state-organized violence revealed the same lack of basic organization. In January 2001 a provincial newspaper reported on a group of 350 policemen who were to leave the Altai region for a three-month assignment in Chechnya.⁸ The report included an appeal made by the Chamber of Local Entrepreneurs to the broader business community. Describing the poor equipment of the Altai policemen, the chamber asked for contributions: 'The Federal [government] provides for the troops while in Chechnya, but it is up to the troops themselves to take care of their personal equipment and gear. [Our policemen] have neither modern helmets, nor bulletproof vests, nor portable radio sets. And without our help – they never will ... We ask you for your help in equipping our guys so that they could at least remotely resemble the technical level of the [Chechen] fighters [*boeviki*].'⁹ A week later, the newspaper listed some contributions: sheet metal and welding machines from a metal company, five sacks of spaghetti from an individual, a three-month supply of cookies and bottled water from a businessman, first aid sets from a hospital, portable wood-burning ovens from a factory, cash from companies and private citizens – all 'for those who go to Chechnya.'¹⁰

This commodification through which the war becomes a part of the public discourse is crucial for sustaining the war itself. Devoid of political context, the war emerged as a story of individual and collective sacrifices, as an everyday practice of perseverance that radically transformed people's lives. Commodities here are the symbols of an imagined community that is shaped by a shared understanding of everyday survival. As if epitomizing the essence of this depoliticized approach to the war, a local newspaper headlined its report about Altai soldiers in the North Caucasus: 'Chechnya: The everyday [*byt*], work, life, and death.'¹¹ A veteran of the Chechen war makes a similar point in his recollection: 'Some people like to say – it is not possible to forget this service [in Chechnya] ... Of course it is possible. At least, it is possible in my case. For me it all became like a dream now; a very distant night dream. Actually, I do have dreams about Chechnya. Not about fights, though. Just daily life there: mud up to my knee; lice. I brought an undershirt from there. My buddies left their signatures on it. But I dropped it into mud, so it turned out that I brought home some Chechen soil' (see figure 8.2).¹²

Through distant dreams or soiled shirts, such displacement of the war memory helps to encapsulate traumatic experience. Bitter irony



8.2 From a series on Chechnya by Vladimir Bykov, the veteran photographer: 'The Dreaming Soldier,' Chechnya, 1996. Courtesy of the photographer.

makes it easier to keep a sane distance. It also provides some form of rationalization, as in this military joke told by a veteran:

- What does Article 0 of the Constitution say?
- Is there such an article at all?
- Yes, there is. It says that the officer must suffer!¹³

Yet this forgetting and distancing – ironic or desperate – does very little to change the lives of veterans and victims after the war. Unwilling to frame the Chechen war in legal terms (as opposed to the politicized rhetoric), the state provided no recognizable juridical language through which survivors could frame their claims and complaints under existing law. The general impasse in defining the legal status of the war's participants and victims produced two main outcomes. First, the government's persistent unwillingness to address issues of financial and political responsibility for the consequences of the ongoing war was exacerbated by the courts' inclination to rationalize and institutionalize the situation of ambiguity even further. Second, the war's participants and refugees, suffering from physical and psychological injuries, reacted to the lack of any substantive support with bitterness and anger. Veterans in their reactions often expressed a clear recognition of their extreme alienation from the state along with a sense of profound dependency on the state's welfare policy.

When the Orel court dismissed – because of the 'unlocatability' of proof – any possibility for compensation of disabilities incurred by the combatants during their participation in military operations in the Chechen republic,¹⁴ frustrated veterans complained: 'We are actually being told that we should demand compensation from [the Chechen leaders] Maskhadov and Basaev. It appears that protecting the Motherland is just citizens' own private business [*chastnoe delo grazhdan*].'¹⁵ In turn, human rights activists quickly pointed out that the Orel regional court had finally acknowledged a practice that had been pursued by the Ministry of Defence for years: claims for compensation filed by refugees affected by the war in Chechnya were consistently undermined by the ministry's demand for proof that the federal army had indeed caused harm. As one activist put it, 'It might take fifty years or so to make the state recognize its own responsibility. It was just the same with compensation for survivors of the Nazi camps.'¹⁶

Yet, as Uminskii's case demonstrates, the state's disengagement could not be limited to issues of material compensation. Also, such a

withdrawal resulted in a serious crisis of recognition: without the ideological and legal support of the state, the soldier's military experience could easily mutate into an act of banditry. To put it differently, the state's retreat from performing a necessary symbolic work stripped its subjects of categories of perception and rituals of recognition that were used to legitimize the experience through which these subjects were constituted in the first place. What kinds of symbolic practices were available to veterans in this case? How did they communicate their experience to the broader audience – without established narrative scripts and reliable legal frameworks?

Veterans' dependence on public acknowledgment of their military past significantly determines the forms of their self-presentation. Recognition requires a dialogue, however limited it might be. Hence, practices and metaphors of exchange became crucial in veterans' attempts to evoke signs of social respect. Following Georg Simmel, I call this symbolic strategy 'exchange of sacrifices.'¹⁷ Closely weaving together loss and gain, judgment and emotion, interaction and interconnection, exchange of sacrifices is a dialogical event through which distinctive values are simultaneously represented and recognized. Sheet metal, sacks of spaghetti, supplies of cookies, or cash enter this exchange, trying if not to balance, then at least to acknowledge, the value of soldiers' lives. Delineating a community of loss, the exchange of these sacrifices points to a seemingly shared cultural assumption about the universality of 'Article 0' of the Constitution: the officer must suffer.

Benefits of War

In my conversations with veterans, I was always surprised by their persistent reluctance to discuss the goals of the war in Chechnya: my questions were usually dismissed as irrelevant. At best, veterans would simply justify the status quo by saying that there must have been 'some reason.' Critical opinions were few, and in their attempts to frame relations with the state in terms of business exchange, veterans continued the same old strategy of depoliticizing the war that has been performed by the state for more than a decade.

In displacing these *whys*, however, the veterans of the Chechen war were not original. Samuel Hynes in his historical study of soldiers' narratives has traced the same tendency: soldiers of different wars and different generations have usually preferred to leave these *whys* in the shadow of their descriptions of combat experience. Regardless of the

type and timing, war memories seem to follow the same plotline: with some predictable variations, the descriptions of mud, lice, cold, or heat radically overshadow the infrequent questioning of political rationales that determined these wars in the first place.¹⁸ However, as Hynes insists, 'the soldier assumes – *must* assume – that if he did ask that question, if he were allowed to ask it, there would be a rational answer, that what he is doing and suffering makes sense to someone farther up in the chain of command.'¹⁹ What happens, though, when no reasonable explanation can justify one's experience of horror?

When I asked Kirill P., a Chechen war veteran, to describe his perception of people's attitude to veterans, he told me about one incident. The Altai regional government issued free transportation passes for the veterans of the Chechen war. Using such a pass, Kirill once boarded a tram, where he was confronted by a female ticket officer. With a big magnifying lens, she closely examined Kirill's pass, deemed it fake, and demanded that Kirill leave the tram. The veteran refused, despite the officer's threat to call the police. As if dismissing the importance of the story, Kirill finished his description with a phrase: 'Those who know us, they realize very well that we have already paid our Motherland in full.' This instantaneous translation of a failed monetary transaction into a metaphor of exchange and sacrifice was the most characteristic feature of veterans' commentaries. Many sincerely believed that the state had not delivered its part of the deal. As one veteran put it, 'the state has not settled the account [with us].'

Ironically, by building their post-war narratives around descriptions of literal or metaphorical payments, veterans endowed the notions of money and debt with a strong moral connotation. The theme of compensation, benefits, privileges, and money emerged alongside the theme of patriotic duty. Sometimes both themes complemented each other, and economic benefits were presented as a logical sign of respect and recognition. Sometimes the two themes contradicted and undermined each other, construed as two totally incommensurable ways of acknowledging veterans' war past.²⁰ What seemed to be constant in both cases was the assumed understanding that the state was ultimately responsible not only for veterans' post-war economic dislocation but also for the crisis of their state-oriented identity. Complaining about the disengaged state, Nikolai F., a Chechen war veteran, framed this idea in the following way:

We realize what kind of policy it is. As if a puppy is thrown into a river, and if the puppy manages to get to the surface, it means that it is worthy of

living; if not, so be it ... We do not like to see the state performing this sort of policy toward us ... If the state managed to turn us, civil people, young guys, into *boeviki*, well, not quite that, let's say, into warriors, into people who know how to fight, then the state should think hard about the way it can turn us back into civilians [see figure 8.3].

Veterans' attempts to attach a monetary value to their war experience to a large extent stems from a particular form of governmentality that the Russian state introduced in the beginning of the Chechen war. At the end of 1994, the Ministry of Defence doubled the base salary for contract officers and tripled the per diem allowances to servicemen deployed in Chechnya. As a result, a soldier's 'combat payments,' as they are usually called, could easily come up to one thousand dollars a month, roughly six times more than an average salary in the country at the time. Normally deployed for up to six months, servicemen often returned from Chechnya with a substantial amount of cash, at least in theory.²¹

Combat payments significantly modified veterans' assumptions about an exchange of sacrifices: the payments set a clear financial benchmark, a certain level of economic expectations below which veterans did not want to sink. Against the sign of personal financial success epitomized by combat payments, low-income jobs available in the Altai region were not even considered as the starting point of a potential career. Veterans dismissed them out of hand even as a temporary occupation. As Vitalii, one of my informants, explained, 'Yes, job banks have vacancies; they say there are seven thousand positions available today. But, excuse me, a guy who went through all that [war experience], he just would never even think about this job, this "occupation" for 600 rubles [\$20] a month. He would never think about it. Because he knows his own price.'

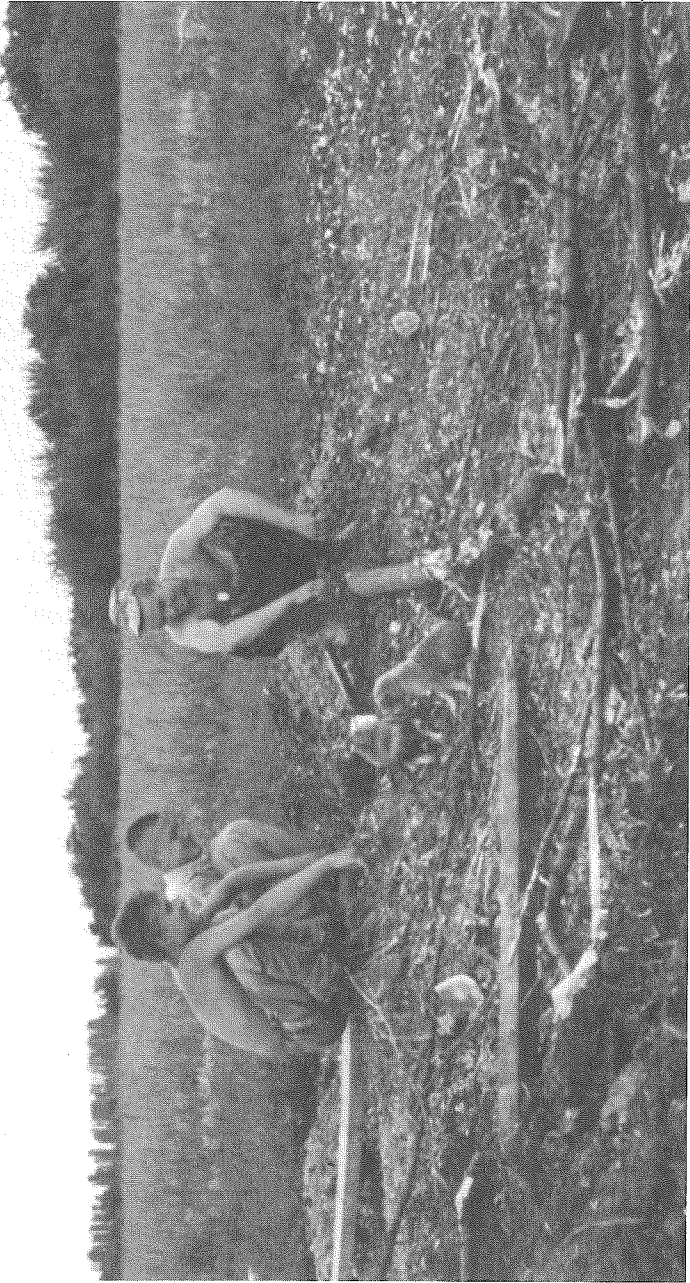
The quick conversion of salary into personal worth is instructive. Sacrifice, to recall Simmel, 'is not only the condition of specific values, but the condition of value as such ... it is not only the price to be paid for particular established values, but the price through which alone values can be established.'²² Hence, one's war experience, one's potential sacrifice of his life, was used as the ultimate measurement for other social relations. Interactions, in short, were construed as exchanges. But as in any exchange, this particular desire to gain something else in return for what has been given up brought with it a double-sided conflict. As Vitalii's comment demonstrates, the search for an appropriate equivalent to mediate between one's sacrifice and its external recogni-

tion requires an ability to negotiate between different moral accounts. In other words, different 'regimes of value,' without which exchange would not be possible, are based on potentially conflicting expectations of this exchange; they also produce dissimilar interests associated with similar values.²³ For Vitalii and many other veterans, competing regimes of value did not represent different points of view about social exchange; rather, these differences were construed as attempts to justify *failed* exchanges – that is, to justify exchanges that devalued the high price originally paid by veterans.

The comment also demonstrates how military identity is resuscitated in the post-war situation: entitlement to a better salary is justified not by better professional skills but by one's experience of war. Significantly, in his attempt to convert the military past into a post-war value, Vitalii failed to find any stable or even positive representation. Heavily rooted in the operation of negation ('would *never even think*'), his rhetorical strategy indexes rather than describes the starting and final points of the argument. Neither the formative war experience ('who went through *all that*') nor one's own worthiness ('price') provided a positive explanation.

Such a discursive paralysis, such an untranslatability of the war experience often determined the veterans' tendency to self-enclosure: their social interactions were often limited to a narrow circle of those who needed no explanation of what 'all that' might have meant. Practically every conversation that I had with ex-soldiers would eventually evolve into a discussion about friendship ties and military bonds formed by the combat experience. Some of them framed it in terms of nostalgia. 'It is not a nostalgia for blood or death that hangs freely around there,' as Aleksei T., a veteran of the first Chechen war, emphasized. 'It is a nostalgia for relations, for situations when people would die for each other; where the collective was one perfect wholeness' (see figure 8.4).

The appeal to an idealized community tested by blood and death is a standard response to one's own dislocation. 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 field, that motivated the soldiers most. The following quotation from an interview with an American soldier in Iraq could be easily paralleled by similar examples from interviews with Chechen war veterans: 'Everybody just did what we had to do. It was just looking out for one another. We weren't fighting for anybody else but ourselves. We weren't



8.3 '... if the puppy manages to get to the surface, it means that it is worthy of living': Russian soldiers with puppies in Chechnya, 1996. Vladimir Bykov, the photographer, called this photo *Puppies*. Courtesy of the photographer.



8.4 '... the war collective was one perfect wholeness': a group of Russian soldiers in Chechnya. The tank hatch in the middle says 'Tanya I love you.' Chechnya, 1996. From a series on Chechnya by Vladimir Bykov. Courtesy of the photographer.

fighting for some higher-up who is somebody; we were just fighting for each other.'²⁴ It was exactly this bonding component that was missing from the post-war lives of Chechen war veterans.

The trope of combat brotherhood had an additional meaning in the history of Russia, too. Memorialization of the Second World War, which accelerated in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, capitalized on the symbolic possibilities that the notion of war-tested solidarity provided. Back then, in the wake of Khrushchev's Thaw, the melodramatic tone of war films and the intimate intonation of the so-called war lieutenants' prose helped to extricate the victory in the Second World War from the messy problem of the Stalinist legacy.²⁵ In post-Soviet Russia, the intimate discourse of military friendship helped again to move one's attention away from political aspects of the war, from the unimaginable and unjustifiable number of casualties and refugees, from (often) incompetent military leadership. Also, it was used as a justification for social withdrawal and self-isolation. War was construed as an emotional experience that radically set veterans apart, making their biographies almost incomprehensible to others.

Minding Their Own Business

Veterans often interpret their unsuccessful attempts to integrate themselves into the community of civilians as a consequence of a prejudice against them on the part of those who did not have the same (war) past.²⁶ The imposed or imagined experience of non-integration, in other words, was reframed as veterans' enforced marginalization. Admitting the zero-level opportunity available to them, in their discussions my informants referred to *bezyskhodnost'* (despair) – a feeling of being interminably captured, literally, 'a situation without exit' – as a main source of their own criminality. Deeply aware of their negative public image, very few veterans tried to defend crimes committed by their brothers in arms. But almost every ex-soldier I talked to was strongly compelled to explain the origin of this situation, as in this quotation from my interview with a veteran: 'We are told all the time: "Sorry we do not have any job vacancies." In fact, they just do not want to hire us. But for how long could a man wander about, with no job, with no money? ... He won't beg. He'd rather pick up a stem [*stvol*, a gun].'²⁷ References to their own special sensitivity and psychological imbalance were used by veterans if not to justify, then at least to downplay outbursts of violent behaviour.

In this context, veterans' solidarity rooted in the shared experience

of war was perceived not only as a source of individual and group identity but also as an effective preventative tool. Nikolai F., a leader of the Union of Chechen War Veterans, which brings ex-soldiers together, passionately described the essence of this precautionary solidarity in an interview. As he put it, the main goal of the union 'is to bring everyone together and to prevent once and forever our guys from any further fighting. Because they still wage their wars here. Some are in criminal gangs, some by themselves. If we let it go in this direction ... many lives would have a very pitiful end. Even today many of our guys are behind prison bars, convicted of anything from armed robbery to murders. This is our tragedy.'

A combination of this military solidarity with a perceived (or experienced) rejection by the outside world resulted in a peculiar striving for self-enclosure. Used as a navigation tool in veterans' life after demobilization, war identity and war experience were projected onto business relations in the form of an idealized military fraternity. The solution to a permanent conflict between potential employers and ex-servicemen was found in the idea of a homogenized environment: a community of war veterans minding their own business. Within this business and symbolic context, the veterans' idea about enterprises for 'veterans only' seemed to be a plausible solution for an extended crisis.²⁸ I quote an excerpt from my conversation with two veterans, Vladimir V. and Grigorii B. Both were participants of the first Chechen war and are actively involved in the veteran movement in the region. Explaining the socio-economic reasoning behind organizing enterprises for veterans, they said:

Vladimir V.: We are trying to raise the economic activity [of the veterans], and it would be desirable if the power structures [authorities] would help us in doing this, because it is much easier for veterans to work with other veterans. Look, an average chief manager of a factory would never hire a veteran because he is afraid of him. But I would hire him right away. And there is a simple reason for this. If a veteran is my employee, I could pull very different levers to punish him when he confuses which shore to swim to, so to speak ... I would have a moral right to reprimand him. Unlike this chief manager, who most likely is a civilian, with no army experience whatsoever, with no moral right to reprimand ...

Grigorii B.: It is simple. Nobody knows us better than we ourselves. We

need only half a word to understand each other. And usually, we don't let each other down, that's our upbringing. And when we do let people down, it is not our fault. If we organize our own working environment, it could help us to avoid situations when a boss would kick a veteran around ... We are trying to pick guys in such a way that in the end there would be a single wholeness. It is not a secret that our brother takes things too close to his heart. If someone on a street gives him a wrong look, he would 'define' this person without saying a word.²⁹ And in principle, he has a moral right to this, even though it is wrong from a legal point of view.

These remarks reveal the clear impossibility of military economics to produce a necessary social effect. Creating a special working environment for young men cannot be justified by the logic of market competition. Instead, the possibility of social self-enclosure – the production of a special niche – was constructed through a discourse on morality. It was not the short-term effectiveness of veterans' professional skills that mattered; what counted instead was the long-term preventative social effect that the enclosed environment could deliver.

This image of an enclosed working community brings back utopian fantasies of self-sustained and self-policing phalansteries. Yet what is striking about this particular attempt to create a business environment through military bonds is the underlying belief in the incommensurability of military and civilian experiences. The scope of exchange of sacrifices between the two worlds becomes extremely limited here, producing two parallel domains of value circulation. Veterans' perception of their war experience implies a peculiar regime of non-coverage that could recognize once and for all the inconvertibility of the values around which their community was built.

As the relationship between the veterans' 'moral right' and the civilians' 'legal point of view' spelled out by Grigorii B. demonstrates, this dissimilarity of 'war-related' and 'civil' values was also a hierarchy. Perhaps even more important was the discursive gesture by which this contradiction deepened. The supremacy of illegal-yet-moral right was defended by references to one's performance of his civic duty. Military service was construed as superior to legal equality. What is crucial for understanding veterans' post-war identity is the fact that their appeals to (illegal) moral right had no content apart from patriotic experience. It was precisely the *origin* of this right that the formality of the law failed to recognize or purposefully ignored.

'What if there is a war tomorrow?'

The veterans' rhetoric of a post-combat economy, with their emphasis on completing the exchanges started between officers and the state, created a discursive position outside the potentially charged political framings of the Chechen war. Similar to the language of legality, analysed by Jean and John Comaroff the language of exchange indicated a point of entry into the field of interaction with the state by suggesting a (somewhat) non-confrontational way of articulating one's social claims and entitlements.³⁰ The limits of this war-as-a-business approach, however, became very clear when the state refused to recognize its debts to soldiers – that is, when soldiers' claims to being paid back were simply dismissed as irrelevant or inappropriate. Moreover, effective as it might be in settling financial disputes, the language of the post-combat economy failed to evoke signs of social respect, crucial in the post-Soviet situation where the personal and the economic tend to be tightly intertwined.

The social impasse produced by metaphors of war-as-a-business pushed veterans to activate a different symbolic strategy in which militarized economics was complemented or overshadowed by patriotic values. In the following quotation from my interview with Viktor Z., the financial persistently echoed and emphasized the patriotic. Our conversation was about the goal of the Chechen war. Without my prompting, Viktor immediately started talking about combat payments: 'Some people think it is all because of money. But the amount of money that we get there cannot justify the fighting ... True, it is hard to survive without money. But you know there is a line that I often recall: "Not for bucks or rubles did our guys fall here, but in order to be able again to call you, Russia, the Great Rus' [*Rus' velikaia*]." Average conscripts like us, we all had in our subconscious that we were doing it really for Russia. But I have no idea what the big shots thought about this.'

It is important to see how the initial split, bucks versus death for the Great Rus', was amplified by yet another form of differentiation: average soldiers versus big shots. Eventually these two juxtapositions would be reassembled and reconnected in a different configuration: 'Big shots with bucks' would oppose the community of rank-and-file soldiers who 'have paid to the Motherland' with blood and life, as another Chechen war veteran put it. Exhibiting a tendency towards self-enclosure, this splitting once again justified social exclusions/inclusions, this time on moral grounds.

Sometimes, this striving for a close (and closed) community of shared values and experience would take veterans in unexpected directions. In several discussions, I was told that it was prison – or rather, the *zona*, a prison camp – that Chechen war veterans saw as the ultimate moral antidote to the lack of public respect and recognition. It was exactly in this social milieu, as Vladimir V. put it, that 'veterans are appreciated accordingly.' 'It is a paradox, but somehow in the zones it is valued a lot that someone has defended his Motherland. Not in school, but in the zone! ... [in the zones] they managed to preserve the patriotism that the civilians almost completely lost. We should set this as our benchmark.'

In this implicit vindication of criminality through patriotism, the seemingly sudden juxtaposition of schools and prisons is jarring only at first. The two institutions, being perhaps the most vivid metonymies of the state, logically point to a third one that remained unmentioned: the army. The implied triangulation usefully outlines the closed circuit of a symbolic economy within which these institutions – along with prisoners of war – are involved and within which patriotism is actively promulgated. Respect for defenders of the motherland is associated with enclosed institutions of state power.

Significantly, attachment to one's country is construed here in terms of one's ability to endure traumatic hardship and the ordeals that this country offers. The hardship of the war experience not only becomes fundamentally formative and life defining but also untranslatable. In their interviews, songs, diaries, and memoirs, veterans again and again point to the profound absence of any symbolic equivalent that could render their experience meaningful for outsiders. For instance, recently published notes from a war journal kept by the soldier Aleksandr Zhembrovskii in Chechnya are preceded by the following epigraph: 'We found the most loyal friends here. People who have not been here, who never took a risk, would never understand us. Only mother, father, brother, and friend who went through Chechnya or Afghanistan, would understand us.'³¹ The experience and memory of war are used as a symbolic shield and a last refuge from the outsiders. As an Afghan war veteran put it in a response to an interviewer, 'Just leave [the war] alone. It's ours!'³²

This perception of an individual or group experience as incomprehensible to others – this adamant insistence on a hermeneutical enclosure of sorts – could be interpreted as yet another version of idealized collectivity. The sociosymbolic cartography of binaries (civil versus military, military versus education, education versus camps) helped to

structure, classify, and homogenize the experience and representations of the Chechen war. This cartography isolated units (mother, brother, friend, big shot). It created connections among them. It rationalized social interactions (bucks, blood) or rediscovered forgotten continuities. It also shifted the discursive production from forms of exchange to notions of identity and recognition.

In the remark quoted earlier, the spontaneous juxtaposition of the patriotically inclined zones versus unpatriotic schools was not merely a rhetorical or structural opposition. Continuing a long-established tradition to appeal to the educational importance of the combat experience, local schools often ask Chechen war veterans to take part in various patriotic events. Traditionally, this participation amounts to veterans' public talks and informal conversations with students. What distinguished the veterans' union in that respect was a ramified system of so-called military-patriotic clubs that veterans started creating in Barnaul after the first Chechen war. The initial motivation for creating these clubs, as I was told by Kirill P., the leader of the 'patriotic division' of the Union of the veterans of the Chechen war, had to do with ex-soldiers' conscious attempt to 'pull kids from basements, to distract them from alcohol, drugs, and crime.' By and large, the ordering and normalizing effect of this education was associated with the incorporation of a militarized structure of conduct. All cadets, as the members of the clubs are called, are expected to memorize and recite on request the actual Rules of Army Conduct. All cadets know their respective place in the hierarchy, determined by a respective rank. They also participate in staged combats, sport competitions, and boot camps in the nearby Altai Mountains.

Fantasizing, the twenty-four-year-old Kirill also told me about his two biggest dreams. Getting his hands on enough Kalashnikovs was one of them. The veteran described how these guns could be arranged nicely on a special ladder-like stand, how an armed cadet would be put on guard next to it; how cadets would get busy with cleaning and assembling guns, each with a specially assigned number. Acting as an important sign of group belonging, the Kalashnikov was invested with some educational capacity as well. 'When they handle these weapons, they become more responsible: it is a gun after all! This way, they take themselves more seriously, too.'

Interested in understanding the specifics of the 'patriotic' part in the 'military-patriotic' name of clubs, I tried to get some explanations from Kirill. His initial answer was quite formal: 'The task is to love our

Motherland.' I pressed further, asking him to elaborate. 'The Motherland, as I understand it, is about one's own home, mother, relatives. What if something happens? Who is going to defend us? If you are a real man, you could just pick up an automatic gun, and would go to protect.' The explanation quickly changed into a discussion about the legacy of the Chechen and Afghan wars. 'We are not trying to impress upon cadets any specific view about Afghanistan or Chechnya. We just teach them how not to be afraid of the situation that we are in ... It is not easy. But who has an easy life today? And what if there is a war tomorrow?'

This structural dominance of the logic of siege is emblematic of the Chechen war veteran movement in general. The impact of the war experience on ex-soldiers is obvious. What is unexpected, however, is the shift in emphasis in the process of reclaiming this experience *after* the war. As mentioned earlier, the war past was rarely turned into a starting point for an anti-war or war-preventing activity in the present, as was common in official Soviet pro-peace propaganda. Instead, it was the idea of being ready for a possible war, the perception of the region in danger that brought people together and organized them in their post-war life. It was in the process of this shift, as the quotation indicates, that the task of loving the motherland was straightforwardly and unproblematically equated with the training of how not to be afraid of the current situation.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to show that the absence of a recognizable and legitimate framework for representing the unpopular war created a particular discursive and identificatory crisis for ex-soldiers. In many cases, their demobilization also meant a lack of social status. Veterans responded to this crisis by presenting publicly their war experience in Chechnya as a particular form of business in which sacrifice and suffering should be compensated or, at least, recognized by the state. This discursive move bracketed off the questionable nature of the unpopular war and the veterans' own role in it.

Simultaneously, as if mirroring the disengaged state, veterans discovered solutions to their problems in various forms of departure from the public sphere. As a result, regimented social and symbolic settings – phalansteries, boot camps, zones – were envisioned as emotionally charged places where exchanges were completed and sacrifices did not

remain unnoticed. In a reversed form, these militarized metaphors and practices of enclosed but understanding military brotherhood provided striking illustrations of veterans' own notion of exitlessness: a lack of entry into the world of the civilians experienced by the veterans was transformed into fantasies of a militarized community of brothers in arms who walled themselves off from the outsiders.

NOTES

This chapter is drawn from research presented in my study *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2009). It has been substantially reworked for inclusion in this volume, but I wish to thank Cornell University Press for its permission to reuse parts of my earlier work.

- 1 Richard Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans against the War* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 188–252.
- 2 Yaroslav Zorin, 'Veteranu Chechenskoi voiny posovetovali sudit' sia s Basaevym i Maskhadovym,' *Gazeta*, 12 January 2005.
- 3 Sergei Zhdakaev, 'Veteran chechenskoi voiny putatsia v zuskat' uscherb s Basaeva i Maskhadova,' *Izvestia*, 13 January 2005; Valentina Ostroushko, 'Basaev gotov platit,' *Novye Izvestia*, 18 January 2005.
- 4 Dmitrii Smetanin, 'Neob'avlennaya voina,' *Severnyi Kavkaz*, 26 January 2005.
- 5 Zhdakaev, 'Veteran chechenskoi voiny putatsia.'
- 6 Vladimir Mokhov, 'Realii. V sud vzyvaetsia ... Basaev,' *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 15 January 2005.
- 7 See a collection of materials in *Medved' 14* (1996): 53–4; see also Vitalii Noskov, 'Liubite nas, poka my zhivy' (Novosibirsk: RIF-Novosibirsk, 2001).
- 8 In 2001 regular troops in Chechnya were replaced officially by professional divisions of the Ministry of the Interior. Chechnya was divided into eighteen temporary zones that have been policed on a rotating basis by professional officers brought from all over the country. See 'Otriad osobogo naznacheniia,' *Altaiskaia pravda*, 24 January 2001.
- 9 *Boevik* is routinely used in Russian in regard to Chechen rebels. Russian soldiers also use this word to describe themselves. The word has a common root with the word *boi* (combat) and is sometimes translated as 'fighter,' 'hit man,' or 'assassin.' Unlike a hit man or assassin, *boevik* also implies belonging to an organized group beyond state control or even opposed to the state. There is a certain similarity to the mafia, but the *boevik's* professional iden-

- tity, unlike the mafioso's, is solely defined by the production of violence.
- 10 Namedni, 'Peredaite tem, kto poedet v Chechniu,' *Altaiskaia Pravda*, 31 January 2001.
- 11 Sergei Kochevnikov, 'Chechnia: byt, rabota, zhizn, smert,' *Svobodnyi kurs*, 4 May 2000, 16.
- 12 Konstantin Somov, 'Dmitrii Kappes: Boi po pravilam,' *Altaiskaia Pravda*, 28 April 2001.
- 13 Aleksandr Agalkov, 'Khozhdenie za tri goroda,' in *My byli na etikh voynakh*, ed. Ya. Gordin and V. Grigoriev (St Petersburg: Zvezda, 2003), 210.
- 14 Zorin, 'Veteranu Chechenskoi voiny.'
- 15 Zhdakaev, 'Veteran chechenskoi voiny putatsia.'
- 16 Valentina Sunlianskaia, 'Opravliat' postradavshikh v Chechne za kompensatsiei k Basaevu – obychnaia praktika v Rossii.' *IA REGNUM*. Electronic document, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/389145.html> (accessed 9 November 2009).
- 17 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. T. Bottomore and D. Frisby (New York: Routledge, 1978).
- 18 Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945* (New York: Picador, 2006), traces these descriptions of daily life during the Second World War in her interviews with Russian veterans. For similar recollections of the participants of the Afghan and Chechen wars, see, respectively, Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*, trans. J. and Robin Whitby (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992); and Valerii Gorban, 'Dnevnik ofitsera OMONa,' in *My byli na etikh voynakh*, ed. Gordin and Grigoriev.
- 19 Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Allen Lane, 1997), 12.
- 20 I.M. Dynin, *Posle Afganistana: 'Afgantsy' v pis'makh, dokumentakh, svidetel'stvoakh ochevidtsev* (Moscow: Profizdat, 1990), 59–130, provides a set of examples suggesting that the trope of duty/debt became a central part of the public rhetoric in the late 1980s, after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.
- 21 See Aleksei Zakharov, 'Voennaya sluzhba: napravlen v Chechiu – poluchi kompensatsiiu,' *Parlamentskaia gazeta*, 20 September 2000; Julia Mikhailova, 'Snachala zabyli o mertvukh, teper' – o zhivyykh,' *Izvestia*, 17 November 1995; 'Syn pogib v Chechne, a chto zhe gosudarstvo?' *Na strazhe Rodiny*, 9 September 1997.
- 22 Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, 84–5.
- 23 See Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,' in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed.

- Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 57;
David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Dream* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 30–3.
- 24 As quoted in Leonard Wong et al., *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003), 12.
- 25 The term ‘lieutenants’ prose’ is used to describe novels about the Great Patriotic War written by low-ranking officers with war experience. These attempts to look at the war from ‘below’ drastically contrasted with the official glorifying canon of the perception of the war. For a discussion, see Lev Gudkov, *Negativnaia identichnost’, Stat’i 1997–2002* (Moscow: NLO, 2004), 20–58.
- 26 For a similar attitude among South African ex-combatants, see Jacklyn Cock, ‘“Guards and Guns”: Towards Privatized Militarism in Post-Apartheid South Africa,’ *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31 (2005): 796–7.
- 27 After their demobilization, many ex-soldiers join various quasi-military institutions, private as well as public. Following the war in Afghanistan, mass culture also links veterans with late-Soviet and post-Soviet Mafia.
- 28 Cock, ‘Guards and Guns,’ indicates a similar trend in her study of South African ex-combatants: 87 per cent of interviewed ex-soldiers strongly believe that the government must establish a job creation program that would be aimed specifically at them.
- 29 The veteran used the verb *opredeliat’*, which usually means ‘to define.’ Here the verb is used in its less common meaning – ‘to determine the limits,’ ‘to size up,’ but also ‘to confine.’
- 30 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, ‘Reflections on Liberalism, Postculturalism, and ID-ology: Citizenship and Difference in South Africa,’ *Social Identities* 9 (2003): 457.
- 31 Aleksandr Zhembrovsky, ‘Iz boevogo zhurnala,’ in *My byli na etikh voynakh*, ed. Gordin and Grigoriev, 235.
- 32 As quoted in Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 14. On the impossibility of the second-hand comprehension of war, see Hynes, *The Soldier’s Tale*, 1–2; for an opposite view, see James Tatum, *The Mourner’s Song: War and Remembrance from the Iliad to Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), ch. 6.