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## The Politics of Pity: Domesticating Loss in a Russian Province

**ABSTRACT** In this article, I explore how a group of women in a distant Russian province learned to live in the state of grief by creating a space for the traumatic experience in their daily order of things, their personal narratives, and public landscape. Using materials from my fieldwork in Siberia in 2001–03, I demonstrate how the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers domesticated and privatized losses of their sons, which were caused by the Russian state's military politics of the last 20 years. By devising elaborate memorializing practices, the mothers managed to materialize evidence of their loss and suffering. It is precisely this collective and individual production of metonymies of death, I suggest, that not only became the main source of the Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers' new public identities but also acted as the principal vehicle of their politics of pity. [Keywords: mothers, death, ritual, memory, emotion]

"Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead."

—Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

"Communicating in sorrow is still communicating."

—Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*

**I**N THE fall of 2001, Svetlana Pavlukova, the founder of the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers (Barnaul, Siberia), explained to me the main purpose of her activity. In her office, surrounded by photos of soldiers who were killed in the Afghan (1979–89) and Chechen wars (1994–present), Pavlukova said: "I am always telling everyone and everywhere: As long as the memory about our [fallen] sons is alive, they are alive too. As soon as this memory is forgotten, they are dead in a real sense of this word. Today, there are people around who still remember them. . . . And my life was devoted exactly to this. . . . War veterans call me 'Mother Sveta,' and I am proud of this" (conversation with author, November 20, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1980s, Pavlukova's two sons were drafted to the army to participate in the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> In 1988, one son was killed in combat and was awarded postmortem the medal of Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest Soviet distinction. In 1989, Pavlukova established in Altai a local chapter of the national Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers, an umbrella nongovernmental organization (NGO) that enlists about 300 local offices throughout Russia. Relying on their common experience of

loss, the Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers brought relatives of the fallen soldiers together. As the slogan of the Moscow legal organization *Mother's Right* puts it, "Information about killed sons unites their parents."

During the last decade, studies of loss and suffering have emerged as a prominent topic in social sciences and humanities. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11), and the U.S. military's involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, front pages of the main U.S. media sources are frequently occupied by reports about identities and networks built around the experience of loss and practices of grieving, too (e.g., Goodnough 2005; Gorney 2005). These stories about communities of mourners seem to point to a growing tendency: Dealing with outcome of "human-made traumas" (Suarez-Orozco and Robben 2000:15) is not anymore determined by an individual or collective striving for recovery or reconciliation. What becomes crucial instead is people's desire to localize evidence of loss in their everyday lives, to devise—and, sometimes, to politicize—a set of mnemonic practices and material objects that would allow for keeping alive their affective attachments with the dead.

In this article, on the basis of materials that I collected during my fieldwork in Altai in 2001–02, I show how soldiers' deaths caused by the state military politics were localized and domesticated by the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers. I demonstrate how—in the process of incessant multiplication of traces of loss—the mothers shifted their emphasis. The traditional Russian search for the culprit ("Who is to blame?") was displaced by a set

of commemorating practices (“How do we remember?”). Survival was thematized “in relation to death itself, not in relation to dying for something” (Koselleck 2002:312). In their attempt to materialize evidence of loss, the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers became involved in a permanent process of memorialization: They created Memorial Rooms, published “Books of Memory,” unveiled monuments, and rearranged cemeteries. In spite of their differences, all these sites, nonetheless, reveal one persistent tendency: By diffusing loss, this fragmenting signification resists any possibility for a narrative closure and suggests no coherent language of mourning (see Derrida 2001:143). At the same time, these metonymies of death objectify mnemonic structures and affectively anchor commemorative rituals. By welding feelings of loss with available objects and spaces, the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers constructed and performed new identities; what emerged in this process of learning how to live in a state of grief was a “local moral world” (Kleinman 1995:123), a community of loss that “cannot overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community” (Butler 2003:468).

Recently, several anthropological studies have drawn a striking parallel between collapses of utopian political systems and a strong preoccupation with the deaths of authority figures (see, e.g., Borneman 2004; Gal 1991; Verdery 1999). John Borneman, for instance, conceptualizes the end of “totalizing and patricentric” regimes through the metaphor of “the death of the father”: “Identification with the political leader is replaced by rituals of his symbolic decapitation, which could potentially open a path for new configurations of political authority” (2004).

In this article, I also draw attention to a sociosymbolic process that accompanies the end of the totalizing authority in Russia. I am less concerned here with exploring the large-scale symbolic legacy of the dead leaders. Instead, I focus on emotive micropolitics of loss performed by a group of women in a Siberian province. The end of the political regime manifests itself here as a patchwork of mourning through which the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers endow military losses with personalized meaning. Devoid of commemorative scenarios that the Soviet political culture used to provide, the deaths of troops in “local wars”—as military conflicts in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Caucasus are increasingly called in Russia today—became the center of the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ symbolic practices.<sup>3</sup>

As ethnographic studies of violence demonstrate, loss and trauma are often expressed through the signifier of the individual or collective body (e.g., Feldman 1991; Lambek and Antze 2004; Linke 2002; Olujic 1998). This discursive somatization locates and circumscribes traumatic experience; it provides a “somatic interface,” a bodily vehicle able to convey and mediate “people’s sensory inscription” of pain (Feldman 1994:413, 415). Embodiment as a form of pain emplacement turns a suffering body into a sociosymbolic foundation for larger narratives of sacrifice, martyrdom, or victimhood (see Asad 2003:67–99;

Kleinman 1995:173–192; Pitcher 1998; Taylor 1999:151–179; Werbner 1991:149–174). Following this tradition, I explore how affect and pain shape personal narratives, create social networks, and modify public landscapes. However, my study of sensory inscriptions of pain is situated where the “trajectory of historical redress, therapeutic, and completion” (Feldman 2004:166) fail to deliver their curative effect. For most of the 1990s, tropes of martyrdom, human rights frameworks, practices of political activism, or healing scenarios of trauma studies were neglected or perceived as inapplicable for framing losses caused by the Russian state’s military politics. Using ethnographic observations of the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers as my main source, I will construe the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ practices of commemoration as an example of the “politics of pity” that creates and sustains community by mediating affect and loss (Boltanski 1999).

### **“LET SPEAK THE MOTHER OF THE HERO WHO IS DEAD!”**

Barnaul, the site of my fieldwork, is the administrative center of the Altai region, situated on the borders with Mongolia, China, and Kazakhstan. The region cannot sustain itself economically; financial transfers from the federal government make up more than 50 percent of the region’s budget (*Altai Daily Review* 2003). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many military industrial plants that had constituted the socioeconomic backbone of Barnaul were shut down, and the city started shrinking. During the last 15 years, the population decreased from 800,000 to 600,000. As in many Russian provinces, labor-intensive “merchant capitalism” that replaced the defense industry in Barnaul also tends to rely on profit from commerce and depends on privileged relations with local authorities. This form of economic development, as many ethnographers of post-Soviet Russia have pointed out, prevents, rather than contributes to, the formation of economically and politically independent groups (Humphrey 2002:69–99). Control over state subsidies in the absence of economically independent groups has turned local government into the major source of financial and political support available for local NGOs. It should be not surprising, then, that the city and regional governments cover the rent and utility costs of the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers and sponsor the committee’s publications. In many interviews, I was also told about monthly cash payments (\$3 in 2001) and food packages that district administrations provided to the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers.

The confluence of administrative and financial power has resulted in political stagnation as well. From the end of the 1980s, key administrative positions in Altai were almost permanently occupied by members of the Communist party. It is against the background of the regime that has not quite ended that the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers create their network of support and perform their practices of memorialization.



**FIGURE 1.** “Died while performing international duty”: A grave of a soldier who died in Afghanistan, Barnaul, 2004. Author’s photo.

The Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ emphasis on mnemonic symbolism drastically contrasts with the activity of the committee’s branches in more developed parts of Russia. From its very beginning, the leadership of the national committee was concerned with the secrecy that accompanied losses of soldiers drafted for the war in Afghanistan. The Soviet government did not disclose information about casualties, and some soldiers’ graves from the 1980s still bear the trace of this secrecy: Using the typical euphemism, grave monuments proclaim that soldiers “died while performing international duty” (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1990s, the committee’s most active offices, located in Moscow and St. Petersburg, were instrumental in finding information about missing troops. Sometimes the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers helped to rescue soldiers held in captivity by the Afghan military; in other cases the committee defended hazed conscripts

who deserted from their divisions. After the beginning of the first Chechen war (1994–96), the national committee’s leadership took an active antiwar position, demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya. Several local offices translated issues of state-organized violence into terms of political and financial responsibility. For example, in 2004 lawyers of the Moscow-based Foundation *The Mother’s Right* took part in 130 trials around the country, seeking financial compensation for families who lost sons in the army (Otchet o Deiatel’nosti 2004). For its activity, the national committee was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. It is precisely this political strategy that has become emblematic for the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ movement in Russia and abroad (see, e.g., Hemment 2004).

In Altai, the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers reveals quite a different aspiration and dynamic. There, loss has never been articulated in the language of legal compensation and political responsibility. Neither did it inspire an antiwar movement. Not having a professional lawyer, psychologist, or social worker among its staff members, the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldier’s Mothers has not initiated a single court case throughout its history. Instead, as Pavlukova’s comment quoted earlier indicates, it is elaborate memorialization that preoccupies these mothers.<sup>5</sup> Together with the Union of the Veterans of Local Wars, in 1991 they opened House of Veterans (see Figure 2). In 1992, the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers published *Sons of Altai*, a book of photos and biographies of Altai soldiers who died in Afghanistan; in 1994, the committee reburied the remains of soldiers in a specially allocated row of a Barnaul cemetery.

In the second half of the 1990s, with the Chechen war in progress, the situation was repeated. In 1996, memorial plaques with names of Altai soldiers who died in military conflict in the Caucasus and Central Asia were unveiled. In 1999, a new book of obituaries for the Altai troops killed in Chechnya was published. Currently, two more books are being prepared for publication.

This active and deliberate proliferation of memorial practices and sites could be seen as the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ reaction to society’s prolonged indifference toward their suffering. By performing various death rituals, the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers evokes an expression of public support and succeeds in constructing a good death—that is, a death that has witnesses, a death that does not fall into oblivion (Seremetakis 1991:101). Explaining the history of the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers, Pavlukova told me how the committee decided in 1989 to bring together all the Altai mothers whose sons were killed in Afghanistan: “All these years, people were as if totally forgotten . . . and suddenly they all got together and they were told about their rights, and that there were other people, similar to themselves; that there were people with a similar grief [*gore*]” (conversation with author, November 20, 2001).

This theme of pain that has not been acted out works as the main structuring and narrative principle: An



**FIGURE 2.** Localizing wars: House of Veterans and Memorial to Fallen Soldiers. Barnaul, 2004. Author's photo.

ability to express their grief in public produces a powerful binding experience among the mothers. The anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis, speaking about a community of mourning women in Greece, pointed out that such “an affective enclave” functions as “a value-charged site from which women address and characterize the social order”: Truth claims are constructed as a direct continuation of “the emotional force of pain” (1993:146, 148). The power of this force was clearly realized by the mothers. In an interview, Pavlukova described how in 1991 she tried to find a truck to bring from St. Petersburg already-printed copies of *Sons of Altai*, a book of soldiers’ obituaries. Not knowing where to go, she attended a public meeting with a “certain foreign lord,” who brought to Barnaul several wheelchairs to help injured soldiers who had rescued the lord’s relative from a marsh. Sitting with her friend, Pavlukova was patiently waiting for the right moment. As she put it,

I had no idea whom to ask for the truck I needed. But I have a book with photos of my sons [in Afghanistan]. ... So I raised the book above my head. As soon as a soldier-hero finished talking, I raised the book. I was all in tears but managed to say: “Let speak the mother of the hero who is dead!” So I explained that others have such books, and that I also want one, that our boys deserved it too. ... It was a shock for me. ... I cried. Afterwards, I asked the friend: “Did I speak clearly?” She said, “No. Nothing was clear at all, except for one

thing—you needed something.” [conversation with author, November 20, 2001]

It is instructive to see how Pavlukova describes (retrospectively) the process of constructing a dialogical environment. Her insistence on public speech, her demand for communication—“give the word to the mother,” as a literal translation from Russian would have it—happened in a situation in which her potential addressee was unknown (“had no idea whom to ask”). It was the emotionally charged word; it was an evocation of the dead that was supposed to create a context for dialogical exchange in the process of the mother’s public articulation of her pain. Importantly, the mother’s insistence on “having word” worked as a point of entry rather than as a means of explanation. Pavlukova’s activation of the affective meaning of speech preempted an attempt to explain (“nothing was clear at all”), but the representational aspect was not completely lost in this vocalization of pain.<sup>6</sup> A different form of symbolization compensated the failure to convey the content in speech: An acoustics of pain was to echo the materiality of the sons’ photographs from the book.

What I find significant in this and other similar cases is the configuration of the “social order” that appears from the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ emotionally invested subject position. The Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ comments and practices reverse the traditional Durkheimian understanding of mourning as an outcome of the moral pressure that society exercises in critical times over its members in order to strengthen social solidarity. In the process of articulating their grief, the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers did not just “repair” temporary gaps produced by deaths in the social fabric; more importantly, they constructed a new social order (see Ferme 2001:223). The Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ active creation of social bonds, which never existed before, preceded collective assemblings for rituals of mourning. The commonality of “a common misfortune” and the collectivity of “collective sentiments” (Durkheim 1967:445) were established before they could be “renewed” in the process of collective effervescence of this community of loss.

### COORDINATING PAIN IN SPACE

The sharing of loss and suffering helped the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers convert personal pain into collectivized memory, which was in turn materialized as an arranged amalgam of objects, places, and rituals, as “material sites of affective experience” (Flatley 2001:91). An active participant in the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers, Katerina Mikhailova—whose son “drowned” in the army,<sup>7</sup> as official documents put it—described her participation in a conference of parents organized in the early 1990s by the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers:

Every mother expressed her own pain: how her son died, all these details ... we all cried there a lot: you know, to listen to this pain, what kind of death people had, how



**FIGURE 3.** Rearranging public space: A funeral of a soldier killed in the Chechen war. The Altai Museum of Regional History, Barnaul. The Archive of Local Wars, Folder #16804/2. Reproduced with permission.

they were buried. ... We sobbed and wailed, of course ... and after that I started coming here once in a while. And one day I was told, "We need a Room of Memory (*kommnata pamiati*)," I promised to do it. ... And this is how it all started. [conversation with author, October 29, 2001]

I want to emphasize the trajectory that the expression of pain assumes in this production of the "common misfortune." Individual isolation is broken down by making one's suffering visible and heard. Multiplied in personal narratives, loss is localized and contained, first of all, spatially: as a room of memory, as a row of graves or as a house of veterans. Yet, it is rarely framed as a public issue: The rearranging of the community's space of existence, the literal production of a different "scene" (Pitcher 1998:9), became more prominent than the identities of those who died or the causes of their deaths. For instance, describing her idea to rebury soldiers, Pavlukova recollected that originally soldiers were buried on the edges of the cemetery, because the authorities tried to hide the evidence of the unpopular war. The Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers brought all these soldiers together (see Figure 3). "In the center," as Pavlukova emphasized. She then added: "We always have a memorial service [*panikhida*] on February 15 [the day when the Soviet troops finally left Afghanistan]... There is a small chapel at the cemetery now, so we all come, put up candles, stand

a bit, nobody gets cold; then we walk through the cemetery and then go back home and lay a memorial table there [*pominal'nyi stol*]" (conversation with author, November 20, 2001).

This mortuary rearranging of space concerns more than the dead. As Katherine Verdery suggests, (re)burial creates and reorders community not only by reaffirming the mourners but also by narrowing and bounding the borders of this group (1999:108). Demarcating a community of loss, funereal practices closely connect the reconfiguration of landscape and the reorganization of society (see Figure 4). For Verdery, this reconfiguration of the posttraumatic landscape is part of a larger process in which the new (spatial) order is turned into the moral foundation of a new life by "pursuing accountability and justice around dead bodies" (1999:111). The Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers' practices point in a similar direction. New forms of collectivity that they established for the dead present a striking contrast with the Soviet practices of commemoration, in which common graves of unknown soldiers juxtaposed elaborate individual grave sites of the Soviet elite as in, for instance, Lenin's Tomb.<sup>8</sup>

However, this transition from material practices of mourning to building a new moral order, as outlined by Verdery, is neither universal nor consistent. A politics of justice aimed at "settling accounts" (Borneman 1997) could



**FIGURE 4.** “The Alley of Glory”: Graves of soldiers consolidated by the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers. Barnaul, 2004. Author’s photo.

be effectively blocked by the “politics of pity,” rooted in a powerful desire to preserve “wounded attachments” (Brown 1995). There is an important difference between the melancholic fixation on one’s feeling of loss and practices of affective memorialization undertaken by the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers, though. The Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ reorganization of space associated with dead bodies can be seen as a form of taking control over the situation in which the role of the mourners was previously reduced to that of passive bystanders. Establishing the sociospatial connectedness of the dead is mirrored by the sociospatial production of the community of loss: A relocation of the remains results in a configuration of the public landscape (cemetery). The established configuration of the environment provides a ground (“scene”), a literal place (“a chapel”) for the survivors; the place also determines their behavior (“we all come,” “put up candles,” “stand a bit,” etc.).<sup>9</sup> In a newly created topography of death, the assumed identity—mother of a soldier who is dead—intertwines the world of family, the world of politics, and the world beyond one’s reach.

The Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ investments in the constant production of a value-charged subject position and their involvement in the circulation of emotion, which this position entails, have their own consequences. As Wendy Brown put it in a similar context, “Politicized identity . . . enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future—for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain” (Brown 1995:74). Establishing connections with a broader community is defined by one’s striving for reflections of one’s own (traumatic) experience in other people’s lives. Exceeding the usual intention to become an object of someone else’s emotional reaction, the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ politics of pity tried to erase a difference between feeling sorry for someone and

feeling someone else’s sorrow. A purposeful coordination of affect required a corresponding coordination of experience (see Eagleton 2003:156).

These specifics through which the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers objectify their “imagined community” are significant because they indicate how the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers modified traditions for deploying suffering in politics. As Hannah Arendt (1963) pointed out in her analysis of political genealogy of “the social question,” an emphasis on people’s suffering was a major driving force in politics since the French Revolution. Usually, it produces two types of responses: (1) compassion, an ability “to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it was contagious,” and (2) pity, a generalized sentiment that fills up the space between those who suffer, on the one hand, and the “community of interest with the oppressed and exploited,” on the other hand. Rooted in the immediacy of response, Arendt observes, compassion is curiously muted and awkward with words,<sup>10</sup> unlike “the eloquent pity” that is able to reach out to a broader audience in its glorification of the suffering of others (1963:85, 88).

Two points are important in Arendt’s interpretation for the purpose of my analysis. The first has to do with the sentimental and arranged quality of pity; the second emphasizes the mediating aspect of pity and thus the role of distance between those who actually suffer and those who perform the politics of pity.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Arendt’s *les hommes faibles*, whose misery was used to justify the political radicalism of the French Revolution (1963:89–90), or the images of “distant suffering” displayed to stimulate charity campaigns among those who are not desperate (analyzed by Boltanski 1999), the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers is far from being the passive object of someone else’s politics inspired by their pain. Instead, their representations of pain, their experience of suffering, and their emotionally driven attempts to negotiate new social positions are merged. Firmly based in their

experience of loss, the Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers themselves perform the emotive politics of pity to produce a recognizable identity in a situation in which more conventional forms of identification and political representation either cease to function or only start to emerge.

In Barnaul, I observed how Tatiana Muromova, an activist of the branch of Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers that deals with abuses in the army, instructed a mother who came from a nearby village. The mother's son was drafted to a remote military base, and for several weeks she had no news from the son. Alarmed by the silence, the mother sold a cow, bought train tickets, and went to the military base. As she discovered, the son had been hospitalized for some time, his feet were infected and had started "rotting," as she put it. She kidnapped the son and brought him home. But realizing that such an act was a criminal offence, she came to the committee. In the conversation with the mother, Tatiana first suggested that she get a divorce. According to law, a single mother with only one son could be granted an exemption from the military service by the Ministry of Defense. The suggestion was not really plausible (the mother had one more son). Having explored other, even less realistic possibilities, Tatiana finally resorted to what seemed to be the most effective tool. She advised to talk to the military officials, because one has to find a "common language even with the enemy," as she put it. "You have to cry"—Tatiana advised the mother—"Cry as only a mother could" (observation by author, November 1, 2001).

Several weeks later, in an interview, Tatiana revealed the origin of this approach, without mentioning any connection with this particular case: "When I came here, I did not know what to do. . . . There was this permanent grief [gore] all the time, so. . . . But Olga [Kuznetsova, the head of the committee's branch] told me: 'Sit at the table. A mother comes, she cries, so you cry with her, too.' . . . This is how I started in 1994." (conversation with author, November 12, 2001).

It is exactly this conscious "recourse to a shared, and relatively fixed set, of public gestures" as opposed to unmediated empathy—it is a political production of "a chain of communication of feeling," as Arjun Appadurai put it—that seems to enable the Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers to conduct their emotive politics of pity (Appadurai 1990:110,107; see also Skidmore 2003:9). The distinction between those who suffer and those who do not, which is commonly associated with the politics of pity, persists here, too. But it has a different authorship and a different function. Preoccupied with the affective mediation and networks that articulations of trauma stories can produce, the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers did not succeed in turning language into "their non-violent weapon to capture the public consciousness" of those outside of their immediate circle—as did, for example, the Argentinean Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo by actively unmasking the junta's practice of abduction and the murders of the disappeared (Bouvard 1994:131). It was presumed reci-

procity, universality, and unavoidability of suffering that acted here as the main social linkage and as the main tool of exclusion.

One consequence of this distancing effect of the traumatic experience was quite surprising. The Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers is indeed a committee that brings together only mothers. Fathers' participation is infrequent and irregular; moreover, all the mothers I interviewed were either widows or remarried to someone other than the dead son's father. What is more striking is the fact that soldiers' widows or sisters are not involved in the committee's activity either. The mothers' unfriendly comments about widows regularly pop up in their conversations and letters and make widows' participation in the committee even less likely. Partially, this resentment is economically driven: Widows are entitled to much bigger social benefits than the mothers. There are signs that indicate that symbolic hierarchy of traumatic experience is just as important as the material one. The mothers are painfully discriminating in following the social typology of loss that underlies their collective rituals. Only recently, commemorative anniversaries in the city started including mothers of soldiers killed in Chechnya. Previously, these public gatherings brought together only mothers whose sons died in Afghanistan. Significantly, the mothers whose sons died because of abuse and negligence in the army are completely excluded from these commemorative rituals altogether. One of these mothers, Olga Kuznetsova, whose son was apparently killed by his fellow soldiers, described to me how she tried to attract attention of the local authorities in these circumstances:

Usually I would come and say to public officials that I am a mother whose son died in the army in a time of peace. . . . I organized [*organizovala*] an album in which all our deceased are. In which our pain is, mainly. The album of pain: pictures, photos, things like that. So, I would come to officials to introduce myself and I would show them portraits from the album, so that they could have a look, and I could see their reaction. If they looked at the portraits with some attention, I then would talk to them. If they just leafed the album through, I would take it back and leave. . . . So, thanks to this album, I found people who are not just interested but also helpful. They understand our pain, they help us. [conversation with author, December 5, 2001]

This story usefully outlines the internal mechanism of the politics of pity. The dialogical exchange between the mother and the official is triangulated: The emotional response is expected to be triggered by the "organized" evidence of loss—the album of pain. Empowering and voyeuristic at the same time, the spectacle of suffering and the witnessing of others' reaction to it became inseparable here.<sup>12</sup> Containing the loss, the album demarcates and mediates the distance between the mother and the official; it radically changes modality of this exchange, too. Articulation of pain is overshadowed by the mother's "emotional *reading*" of her interlocutor (Ahmed 2004:26; emphasis added). Generating a structure for attention and

remembering (Kleinman 1995:124; Saunders and Aghaie 2005:16), this conflation of affect and media, this aestheticized reproduction of loss, at the same time make rhetorically inappropriate and socially misplace any questions about political conditions that have produced these losses in the first place. What is shared here is not a piece of information or a view, which can be contested, but, rather, an intimate space for emotional commitment to the dead. Vocalization of pain and exchange of opinions about tragic losses become discursively, socially, and spatially separate.

### METONYMIES OF DEATH

As I have demonstrated, the reciprocity of grief and shared repertoire of affect, although providing the community of the mothers with an emotionally powerful binding framework, required a supporting environment of artifacts capable of documenting losses and reifying the character of exchanges. The absence of public consensus about Russia's military history of the last 30 years, the polarizing effect that discussions of the Chechen wars tend to produce, and the Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers' own dependency on the local administration made it almost impossible for the committee to appeal to a broader audience. Their inability or unwillingness to articulate their suffering in terms of civic rights and political responsibility, or social help and rehabilitation, led to an active elaboration of the discourse on memory and commemoration. Caused by state-organized violence, loss became inscribed into a series of personalized objects that could sustain one's sense of self and provide "continuing bonds" with the dead (Klass et al. 1996). Remembering here was structured as a process of including the traumatic past into daily practices of the present. I quote from a letter to the head of the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers, written by a mother whose son was also killed in the late 1980s in Afghanistan:

Svetlana, how are you [?] How is your health [?]  
Svetlana we live little by little, I cry a bit and live again.  
We must live on for the memory of our sons. Svetlana,  
... [your son] Kostia is forever alive in our family and he  
lives together with our own son. In the evening, I put  
them asleep, all my sons, and in the morning I wake them  
up and live through the whole day, remembering them.  
... Svetlana, we just got an apartment from the local division  
of the Defense Ministry; [we have to pay only] 50%  
of the rent. ... You are very welcome to come and stay  
with us. Svetlana, can I ask you to send me a photo of  
Kostia. I have one, but it is so tiny. I am compiling an  
*Album of Memory to Those Boys Who Gave Their Lives For  
Freedom of Afghanistan*. I need Kostia on my nightstand,  
too. All of them I put on the nightstand, in frames, with  
flowers around. Apt. is on the ninth floor in a 12-story  
building downtown Omsk, two rooms, 32 square meters  
of living surface. ... Svetlana, ... take care of yourself, do  
not cry too much. An extra day of life is the best memory  
for our sons. It is an extra flower planted on the graves of  
our sons. It is hard; there is nothing to say about it. But  
we must live on. Grit our teeth from pain and live, live,  
live. Live from the memory of our sons. [Furtseva n.d.]

In the set of about 200 letters, which I received from a curator at the Altai Museum of the Local Wars in two

crammed grocery bags, this text is by no means an exception. Written throughout the 1990s by mothers whose sons were killed in "local wars," these letters constantly intertwine loss and pain with descriptions of daily chores, illnesses, new refrigerators, or harvests of potatoes. Addressed to Pavlukova, the letters resurface trauma by breaking it into multiple objects of attachment, by grounding it in a multiplicity of things. Loss is expressed as a circulation of emotions through the vehicle of material objects. Instead of being isolated and mourned—or, as a lot of trauma studies suggest,<sup>13</sup> instead of remaining as a blank spot, as a void that cannot be symbolized—traumatic experience becomes the main structuring principle of the text, the main narrative device that stitches together an otherwise fragmented story.

This strategy of normalization of loss, through its localization and fragmentation, reveals yet another corresponding mechanism through which the loss is inscribed in the everyday life here—namely, through a series of exchanges (apartment, photos, visits, flowers) that is persistently resumed by the loss. Neither forgotten nor recuperated, loss is transposed here to a different plane. Exchanges are not about compensation able to represent the depth of the loss or to justify it. Rather, they present "a *mode of symbolizing* that is both economic and significant" (Goux 1990:4). In another letter from the same collection, a mother whose son died in Afghanistan wrote in 1999:

Dear Svetlana Grigor'evna. ... On Feb. 15 we went to Kluchi [the district's center] to commemorate our children. We were given money there; we visited a church and put up candles, went to the cemetery and to the monument, and after all that we went to a local canteen ... there was a concert, they sang songs about Afghanistan. The kolkhoz's administration gave us 2 kilos of millet, one kilo of buckwheat, one box of tea. Widows lay flowers on the graves, and I also did. [Zhabina 1999]

The conflation of the symbolic and the material-economic in these exchanges (e.g., money-candles-dinner-songs-buckwheat-flowers) has yet another cause. The Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers' appeal for recognition, for acknowledgment of their loss, takes place in a situation when cognition and knowledge of what has happened are often impossible. In many cases, the Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers had no information about the circumstances of their sons' deaths; in some they never saw the bodies. As a mother wrote in her letter: "All that remains from my son is my pain, pride and [his] award" (Furtseva n.d.) In this case, the domestication of loss, its depoliticization, and its relocation within the familiar context of everyday life seems to be the only narrative strategy that makes sense.

This strategy of retaining things that matter was used in another type of text produced by the parents—a collection of obituaries of Altai soldiers who died in Afghanistan. Published in 1992, *Sons of Altai* is usually referred to as "a Book of Memory" (Khramzova 1992). The first regional publication of this type, it listed all the names of the dead

soldiers and provided their photos and biographies. The book united the dead and became a textual equivalent of a portable grave site; it also prefigured the consolidation of the actual graves, as I was told by Pavlukova. Frequently used as a powerful visual argument in discussions, often taken to public meetings and rituals, the book is proudly displayed in the main office of the Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers.

The creation of the first book was not a small event. Initiated in 1991 by the committee and the veterans, it was mostly compiled by a local journalist and a curator from the Altai Museum of the Local Wars. The mechanical production of the book turned into a long saga. Originally, it was to be published by a publishing house in St. Petersburg. In 1991, when visiting the publisher, Pavlukova was told that she herself needed to find ten tons of paper necessary for the book. It was the time when the Soviet Union was about to end, and the centralized system of quotas and distribution was being replaced by less predictable exchanges. Pavlukova managed to secure a quota for paper that had to be reclaimed in Omsk, a city in Siberia. However in Omsk, it was explained to her that paper could not be available immediately and could not be available for money, which was increasingly losing its value because of inflation. After a couple of trips, Pavlukova was finally offered a deal: She could have the paper in exchange for either a hoisting crane or a certain amount of starch. As she recalled in an interview, this was how she learned the meaning of the word *barter*. The exchange did not go in this direction, though: Confused and agitated by the whole affair, Pavlukova fainted during the negotiation of the contract, which prompted the owner of the paper to supply it on less convoluted conditions, that is, in exchange for money.

Stylistically, *Sons of Altai* is a combination of two major traditions that have their roots in the Soviet past. The official canon of commemoration included postcards, albums, and so forth, in which images of soldiers who died in World War II were accompanied by short impersonal descriptions of their heroic feats. The second, much more informal canon is associated with a popular tradition of the "Soldier's Album," a handmade collection of stories, pictures, and poems traditionally prepared by soldiers before returning home (Bannikov 2002:205–216; Karasik 2001). Most obituaries in the book are structured around a plotline similar to this one:

Before Sergei was drafted to the army, he built a well: "This is for you, mother, remember me every time you draw water from it." Alexandra Ivanovna [the mother] also keeps the watch that Sergei bought when he got his first salary, after summer-work during his vacations in grade seven. He did not like to waste time, he always kept himself busy—watering or putting grass in the silo. He did not shy away from the work around the house, either. After the eighth grade, he entered a local college and was certified as a professional tractor driver. The New Year Eve of 1980 Sergei spent in Afghanistan. But his parents found this out only in March. Before, they were getting letters with strange return addresses. In his last letter,

which came in June, Sergei mentioned that his military unit had moved toward the border with Pakistan. Right after that, they got a letter from his commander: "We cannot disclose all the details, but I can say one thing: your son demonstrated a model of courage and bravery when performing a military task. . . . Because of various reasons [*po riadu obstoyatel'stv* ], no personal things survived him, I will try to send a photo, though." This was the style of "death notices" back then. [Khramzova 1992:n.p.]

Personalized but scarce with individual details, these postmortem representations contain almost no political messages or attempts to justify the deaths by depicting heroic acts. It is in this situation, when the crucial details "could not be disclosed" and when "no personal things survived," that attempts to understand what has been lost are replaced by striving to realize what remains (Eng and Kazanjian 2003:2). In the absence of a mythologizing frame or an ideological context, a tragic loss caused by the state is expressed through the theme of an ordinary, private life that has been suddenly stopped or interrupted.<sup>14</sup> It is, perhaps, not surprising that often the private life and the daily order of things are used as models of civic activity, too. Built around issues of death, the affective community of loss is the only social link that leads many of these mothers out of their isolation, as Katerina Mikhailova, a woman who designed and decorated Room of Memory in a local committee, recollected in her interview:

When we put all these photos [of dead soldiers] up, we invited all the parents to come . . . imagine [a mother,] she stays at home, and there is nobody to commemorate her son with. Her soul gets sick; she is lacking something, so she comes here. She comes, with her little bundle, . . . cookies, candies; sometimes, a bottle, not without it. So, we sit down, each gets fifty grams. We do not drink here, really; as Olga puts it: "Only symbolically, fifty grams to everybody!" So, we drink and commemorate her child; hers and the rest of them. Then, we light the candles, stand for a while, and this is it. And this mother, after all that, she wipes her tears up and smiles already. And she goes home in a better mood, a lighter one. . . . Now this committee is my life. I race [*begu*] to get here all the time . . . sometimes—two, three times a week. . . . I miss all these women and boys. . . . I come after work, stop by, and tell [my boy] something about home. And it gets better. I put up a candle, get closer [the son's picture] and stroke him. They had put initially his picture on the very top, it is better there, but I moved it later to a different place, lower. So that now I could reach him, my son. [conversation with author, October 29, 2001]

Facing death without established traditions or rituals, as Tony Walter suggests, often means that "the authority offered in the face of death is the authority not of tradition but of the self" (Walter 1994:188). There is no coherent style or convention to follow: The Red Star easily coincides in the Room of Memory with an icon of Blessed Mary, plastic carnations—a silent reminder of a Soviet revolutionary tradition—jostle with the Russian Orthodox candles, and there is a single overarching slogan "Eternal Glory to the Sons—The Pain of Loss Would Not Be Washed Away

By Tears.” The metonymic logic of these remnants and fragments produces a double effect: It “divides the referential trait, suspends the referent and leaves it to be desired, while still maintaining the reference” (Derrida 2001:61). What becomes crucial in this “affective economy of the detail” (Miller 2003:122) is an ability to retain the signifier of the deceased, while knowing full well that neither the signified nor the referent is available anymore. By constantly oscillating between material references and the absent referents, the mothers remain connected with “the boys” and sustain the circulation of their emotions.

As Mariane Ferme observed, metonymical relations necessarily imply a constant movement between different scales of generalization and analysis—part and whole, large and small, close and distant (Ferme 2001:121). More crucially, the metonymic signification relies on one’s ability to condense the whole in a remnant. Or, to reverse the proposition, it presupposes one’s willingness to unpack the

fragment to trace missing links. I argue that it is precisely this “semiotic volunteerism” (de Certeau et al. 1998:32), this fragmented yet contiguous object relating that helps the mothers prescribe meaning to their loss in an environment devoid of symbolic order. Traces without referents, objects that matter but do not necessarily provide a coherent logic or picture, these fragments, nonetheless, demarcate a field of social relations, provide a context, and sometimes suggest a guideline for action.

The tendency to perceive or even to construct public space through an intense patchwork of symbolism and domesticity was also vividly employed in the Hall of Memory (*Zal Pamiati*), a part of the permanent exhibit of the Altai Museum of the Local Wars. Opened in 1991, the two-room hall displayed standard Soviet devices of memorialization. There was a case with boxes filled with earth from the graves of the soldiers. There was a wall of soldiers’ pictures. There was the usual poster with an anonymous poem; entitled



**FIGURE 5.** A model of Soviet sleeping arrangement for soldiers in Afghanistan. The Altai Museum of the Local Wars, Barnaul, 2001. Author’s photo.

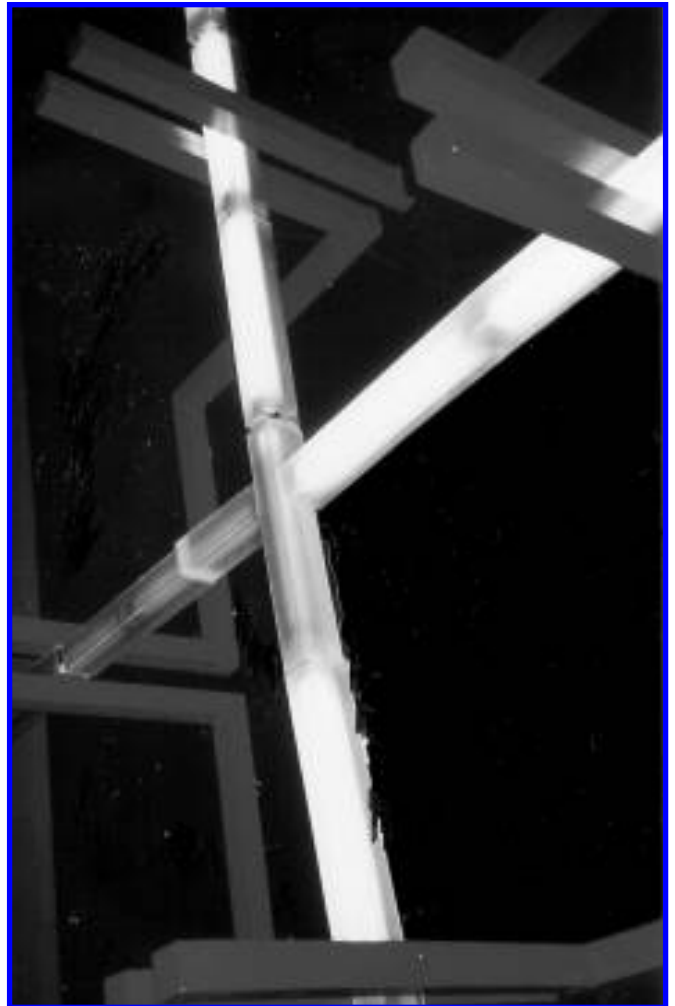
*To the Motherland*, it narrated a message from an imaginary dead soldier:

Commemorate us, Russia, in a December frost  
 Just before you all gather at the holiday table  
 Commemorate those, who were faithful to the military  
 oath  
 Who vanished in eternity but protected you forever.

At the same time, the hall contained something not quite common for a traditional museum exhibit. One corner presented a life-size model of a tent in which soldiers slept during their service in Afghanistan (see Figure 5). The window frames in the rooms were structured as crosses with wrought-iron silhouettes of black tulips to symbolize the airplanes (which were called “Black Tulips”) that transported coffins with bodies from Afghanistan (see Figure 6). Religious symbolism was also reflected in the arrangement of the lighting fixtures in crosses on the ceiling (see Figure 7), and each photo was accompanied by a small candleholder that could be used like votive candles in Russian Orthodox churches (see Figure 8). The curator of the exhibit warned me that this prominence of religious symbolism (in a state museum) should not be read literally. Multiple crosses were meant to symbolize “hope in a broad sense of this word.” In turn, one of the mothers tried to assure me that earth in capsules was indeed brought from real graves: “We go [to the Hall of Memory] every holiday, and could light a candle for each soldier. . . . You know, “*Ave Maria*” or



**FIGURE 6.** 144 black tulips in the cross-shaped window frames. Author's photo.



**FIGURE 7.** Lighting cross in the Hall of Memory. Author's photo.

something like that starts and it goes” (conversation with author, November 20, 2001). The lack of a civic narrative and an analytic distance is compensated for a sentiment-provoking choreography of visual and audio media usually performed within the circle of close relatives and friends. State violence is turned into a private trauma, and a museum is transformed into a site of mourning, a secular church.

To conclude, I want to show how this “sentimentalization of suffering” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997:2, 4), how this affective metonymic attachment to material traces of loss, could result in a dramatic political and symbolic shift. In the end of the 1990s, trying to break away from a seeming state of isolation and simultaneously to keep relations with the local authorities in good condition, the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers framed soldiers’ deaths within an overtly political context.

The second Book of Memory, *We were waiting for you, sons . . .* (My zhdali vas, synovia . . . 1999), compiled by the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers, came out in November 1999, shortly after Putin’s government started the Second Chechen War (1999–present). Together with some



FIGURE 8. Candleholders and photos of soldiers killed in Afghanistan. Author's photo.

journalistic accounts of the first Chechen war, it contained obituaries of the fallen Altai soldiers. The public presentation of the book was staged in a local theater in Barnaul's downtown and was attended by the Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers, veterans of local wars, politicians, and journalists. The ceremony was opened by a videotape-film in which the last hundred years of Russia's history were spiritualized in endless images of churches and naturalized in various pictures of Russian landscapes. The narrative that accompanied this video had a very different message. The century was emplotted as a chain of external attacks and internal treachery: from the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 to the plan of psychological war against Russia in 1950s created by Allan Dulles; from Germany's invasion in 1941 to Russia's current "battles with Islam" in the Caucasus. The century of history emerged as a century of heroic struggle and resistance to alien forces, a resistance that is "deeply rooted" in Russian tradition, as one of the presenters put it. In the process of this historicizing of violence, sons killed in recent "local wars" were presented as a link in the chain of ancestors who died defending their Motherland from a long-standing campaign of various hostile

forces interested in "dismembering" (*raschlenenie*) Russia. The poem read at the opening of the book presentation—a simultaneous message to a "distant ancestor" and to a close descendant ("son")—sums up this interplay of outside pressure and internal resistance well:

The battlefield is ablaze  
 My ancestor, now I recall our tie  
 It is my blood  
 That you shed on the battlefield  
 ... Our blood is intact  
 Even though it has been shed many times  
 It forgets nothing  
 Remember, son, you share the blood of your ancestors.

The importance of biospatial ties between soil, ancestors, and sons was emphasized in a more direct way, too. When a group of dancers in black dresses performed on the stage a series of disjointed movements, the screen behind them depicted footage of the Russian parliament voting in December 1991 in favor of dissolving the Soviet Union (see Figure 9). Simultaneously, the voiceover read a dictionary definition of the word *cosmopolite* as a person who has no roots of his or her own, thus bringing back sinister



**FIGURE 9.** A still from a video film about the public presentation of the book *We Were Waiting for You, Sons . . .* (Barnaul, 1999).

associations with the Stalinist anti-Semitic campaign against “kinless cosmopolites” (*bezrodnye kosmopolity*).

The regional governor, who attended the presentation, sponsored the publication and even authorized the introduction to this “Book of Memory,” added another dimension to this picture. As the governor put it, the soldiers’ deaths were the “price paid for the betrayals” started with the splitting of the Soviet Union. “It is a bitter price. But this is the price we have to pay for the life of our state. We’ve got no other state.”<sup>15</sup> Justified by a lack of choice, the life of the state became associated with deaths in families, whereas the rhetoric of grief helped to transform the state violence in Chechnya into a self-victimizing discourse on the history of betrayals.

This search for a political justification of the military deaths marked a significant break with the symbolic strategies of the early 1990s. Back then, as the curator from the Altai Museum of the Local Wars told me, she wanted to finish the exhibit about the Afghan war with the question “What for?” However, this question was never articulated, it “simply went away,” as the curator put it; but a strong necessity to have an answer remained. By the late 1990s, the quest for explanation acquired the shape of a discursive victimization. By reinterpreting and reenacting previous conflicts and wars, the historicization of suffering helped to bridge the gap between past violence and violence in the present (Schröder and Schmidt 2001). Designed originally to commemorate fallen soldiers, the presentation of the book was turned into a story about the nation’s injuries.

It is hard to tell whether this retreat to the patriotism of despair is a conscious political choice or an example of the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ strategic deployment of essentialism. In interviews that I conducted with the mothers in 2001–02, they rejected any association with existing political groups and movements. Regardless of the mothers’ own intentions, the book presentation clearly out-

lined the limits of their affective metonymic signification: Emotional inscriptions of pain in politics could be easily appropriated by more politically and rhetorically skillful groups that are able to transform the politics of pity into a politics of blame.

## CONCLUSION

Using materials of my fieldwork in Siberia, in this article I explored how a group of women in a distant Russian province learned to live in a state of grief by establishing a space for traumatic experience in their narratives, biographies, and environment. Stories about suffering articulated by the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers created a community of loss that simultaneously acted as a main author and a main target of their politics of pity. At times, the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers’ striving for public recognition of their losses and their own identities resulted in a complicated ethical situation: The mothers’ attempts at prescribing a wider social importance for the deaths of their sons became fundamentally entangled with a public rationalization of the state’s military politics. Yet the post-Soviet ambiguity, with its lack of unifying civic discourses and shared standards, as I suggested, was predominantly overcome by the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers in two major ways: Issues of political responsibility and individual recovery were overshadowed by a powerful discourse on relatedness (“the Mothers of the dead soldiers”) and memorialization (“How do we remember?”). Unable (and unwilling) to rely on political metaphors, the Altai Regional Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers narrated their losses within the genres of biographical stories and personalized emotional events. By displaying their suffering in public, members of the Committee of the Soldiers’ Mothers created an emotionally charged local environment. At the same time, their rituals of metonymic memorialization both reproduced material evidence of their traumas and associated symbolic meaning with their sons’ deaths. Providing a poignant framework for the post-Socialist experience, losses, caused by the state military politics, were turned into a primary form of subjectification, a primary way of relating to other people and institutions.

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## NOTES

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1. Except for Pavlukova's, all names of my informants are changed.
2. Two years of army service is still mandatory for all Russian men between 18 and 27 years old.
3. I discuss the symbolic importance of this ideological vacuum in Oushakine 2000. On practices of political commemorations in Russia, see, for example, Tumarkin 1994.
4. As part of the regular army, 620,000 people participated in the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979–89; more than 15,000 troops were killed during this time (Rossia i SSSR v voynakh 2001:539).
5. For similar examples of this tendency in other Russian regions, see, for example, Dedovshchina 2004.
6. On affective meaning, see Kristeva 1995:104.
7. The Committee of the Soldiers' Mothers are convinced that direct or indirect "suicides" are used to hide real causes for soldiers' deaths (such as a death from fights, rape, murder, etc). For a discussion, see Dedovshchina 2004.
8. On funeral practices in the Soviet time, see Binns 1979, 1980; Merridale 2000.
9. On implicit and explicit parallelism between creating "society of the dead" and recreating one's own society, see Hertz 1960:71; Saunders and Aghaie 2005. On the reconfiguration of public space as a reflection of post-Soviet changes, see, for example, Flatley 2001; Grant 2001.
10. For an anthropological discussion of compassion, see, for example, Lutz 1988:119–154.
11. For an elaborate discussion on distance and politics of pity, see Boltanski 1999.
12. On simultaneity of empowerment and voyeurism in testimonies, see Hesford 2004.
13. See, for example, Caruth 1996; Homans 2000.
14. For a structurally similar tendency, see *Portraits of Grief* (2002), published by the *New York Times* after 9/11.
15. See home video *We Were Waiting for You, Sons . . .* (1999).

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