

'I have no idea how to make myself useful': Chechen War veterans on the state that betrayed

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The Chechen war became, perhaps, the most vivid metaphor for the lawlessness (*bespredel*) of the 1990s and early part of the next century in Russia. It exposed the least attractive features of the post-Soviet state: 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 a history 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.

This case is more than the familiar story about yet another generation of soldiers and officers misused by their government. In a concentrated form, this group shows what happens to strong state-oriented identities when the state suddenly removes its legal, economic, and symbolic support. With some obvious limits, the relationship between veterans and the state described in this chapter has an obvious parallel with the situation created by the collapse of the Soviet state in 1991. Back then, the lifting of the pressure of the paternalistic state did clear a lot of space for free action. At the same time it undermined the basic conventions that for several decades had regulated a large variety of social relations. Even more important, it made meaningless the identities of those who had been taking the state and its institutions seriously and forced these individuals and groups to redefine and renegotiate their self-perception and their social position in radically changing conditions. Based on interviews with veterans of the first Chechen war in Barnaul (Altai), in this essay I want to explore symbolic strategies through ex-combats normalized their war experience in a post-war environment¹.

Many of my meetings with Chechen war veterans in Barnaul took place during the autumn of 2001. The United States had just started a military campaign in Afghanistan, and there was much discussion in the local press about a supposed plan of the American government to hire veterans of the Chechen and Afghan wars to participate in the U.S. operation in Afghanistan. The source of this idea was not quite clear; nonetheless several veterans were interviewed by local media about possible contracted service for the U.S. army. My conversation with Vitalii B., a twenty-four-year-old participant in the first Chechen war, took place just a few hours after a local TV channel had taped his comments. Excited by the sudden attention, Vitalii summed up the prevalent attitude to the possible involvement in a new war:

I'd go to Afghanistan. And there is a very simple reason for this. I have been here, at home, for three years now, and I have no idea how to make myself useful. Yes, we have this [Chechen] veteran movement, and it is all very interesting, but! But the state does not want to help us, it cannot help us. And I am not talking about myself; I am talking about everybody...

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¹ The essay is based on a part of the chapter from my book *The Patriotism of Despair: Loss, Nation, and War in Russia*, Cornell University Press, 2010.



There is nothing. There are no elementary things. A guy comes back from the war... The state gives him some privileges if he decides to study at a university. But no university would ever accept him. Everything he had learned at school, he totally forgot during the war! Everything! ... I'd go to Afghanistan. And it is not because I want it. War is foreign to me. But today this is a way to secure my own future.

There are several important themes in this comment. First, Afghanistan does have a special meaning for Russian soldiers. As a part of the regular army, 620,000 troops participated in the Soviet war in Afghanistan in 1979–89; more than 15,000 were killed during this time. Initially neglected, participants in the Afghan war became glorified in the early 1990s, when memorials and monuments were created throughout the country by ex-servicemen and parents of fallen soldiers (Picture 1, 2).



Picture 1. Memorials to Afghan war veterans: stone of remembrance with the sign 'Bagram' in Minsk (Belarus), 2004. Courtesy of Elena Trubina.

In that respect, the attraction of the new Afghan possibility, at least to some extent, stemmed from the social recognition that Afghan veterans enjoyed in the first half of the 1990s. The comparison with the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan would be used by veterans of the Chechen war as a basic narrative device for structuring their own military experience and postwar claims. There was another, no less crucial, reference in Vitalii's comment that also would become typical. The appeal of a (new) war was rationalized by constructing the following juxtaposition: the extended period of one's own social and professional dislocation was paralleled by a perceived indifference of the state to the fate of its servicemen.

Demobilization emerged as an individual dis-localization vis-à-vis the disengaged state. Nikolai F., a Chechen war veteran, developed this idea further in an interview:

'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.



Picture 2. 'Black Tulip,' a monument to Afghan war veterans in Yekaterinburg (Russia), 2007. Photo by author.

'It appeared that the state-conferred identity balanced on the verge of implosion when the state retreated from its subjectifying function. Hence the trope of abandonment was frequently linked with images of personal deterioration. The question of being worthy of living after the war was turned into a recurrent theme.

In their studies of autobiographical documents and fiction written by Vietnam War veterans, scholars have pointed out that fragmentation of language and personal narrative was one of the main discursive tools that veterans used to describe themselves. Ex-soldiers and literary critics often referred to this conscious aesthetic of disintegration as 'fragging,' using a term that during the Vietnam War described soldiers' assassination of their officers with fragmentation



grenades. In soldiers' prose and poetry, stylistic and narrative disintegration was a way of exploding the official presentations of war. A controlling device of sorts, the discursive fragging worked both as a form of self-defense (self-distancing) and an act of reclaiming language (Bibby, 1993; Gotera, 1993; Hidalgo, 1993).

My informants' stories of collapse and disintegration seemed to follow this general tendency to fragment in order to symbolically control the traumatic experience. In a somewhat similar way, the narrative of self-disintegration was also replayed in war poetry and songs that were widely circulated among the Chechen war veterans. One example of this poetic fragging highlights the theme of postwar collapse.

'Statistics,' a song written and performed by A. Musin, opens a special collection of tapes *From One War to Another (Ot voiny do voiny, 2002)* (Picture 3).



Picture 3. 'From One War to Another.' The cover of a tape recording of soldiers' songs. DD Music, 2002.

The epigraph on the tape cover spells out the main message: 'Songs sung from the heart' (*pesni, spetye serdtsem*). Though the lyrics are mainly focused on the outcome of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, they have a clear reference to the current situation: 'today' is described as 'the time of returning to war, with no one paying for it.'

Relying on a single formula, the author (and the protagonist) throughout the song cites statistics for different types of war veterans' behavior. In its aggregated form, this socio-poetic listing represents the collective corpus of war veterans: 'Every first [man] who has been there [in the war], will never forget it'; 'Every third has no energy to prove anything to anyone'; 'Every fourth has not cooled off and is ready to fight'; 'Every sixth has retreated

from everything, sticking to the Bible or Koran'; 'Every ninth screams at night, waking up from a nightmare.' And finally:

*Every twentieth sees in his life nothing but vodka and tears;
And his life is like a vicious circle that makes mourning roses closer.
Every thirtieth is on a needle, not believing that he is a drug addict;
And the only thing that could bring him back is yet another portion of stuff.
Every two hundredth has no arm or leg; and prosthesis hardly makes sense;
And no benefits could possibly help, no privileges would ever work.
Sometimes, one in a hundred makes his way to prison;
Even this is too many, but this is the only case that we are always reminded about.*

This grim archive of available identities is periodically interrupted by a chorus that explains the nature of this deplorable state. There is no mysticism, the song elaborates: *'It is just statistics that put a deadly noose around us / Every single one of us is in this trap, only our numbers differ / And those who have not been killed by the syndrome / Are being killed by some other means.'*

The statistical trap is presented here as a diversely differentiated list. However, what is striking about this gloomy poetics is that the differentiation emerges in 'Statistics' as a typology, a set of generalized features. Individual biographies are turned into aggregated qualities; the overwhelming anonymity ('only our numbers differ') pairs with profound pessimism ('a deadly noose'). This anonymity, this self-erasure, is an account of one's own ruin, an outline of one's own 'desubjectification' (Agamben, 1999). What this poetics of disintegration repeatedly reveals is an implicit recognition of the fact that no symbolic envelope, no positive meaningful receptacle has been able to produce the desired structuring effect (Lacan, 1997), as if war horrors have seamlessly morphed into the horrors of everyday life.

It is useful to approach these narratives of self-disintegration through the Althusserian idea about the subjectifying force of ideological state apparatuses. In the essay on ideology and ideological state apparatuses, Althusser linked ideological framings and subjectivity: through rituals of ideological recognition 'abstract individuals' are turned into concrete, distinguishable, and irreplaceable subjects (Althusser, 1971). In his oft-cited example, Althusser described how this recognition happens: individuals are walking down the street when a policeman hails, 'Hey, you there!' In most cases, an individual turns around, suspecting or knowing that it was he who was supposed to be hailed (ibid.).

In this reading, ideology is not necessarily equal to brainwashing or to a purposeful distortion of reality. Instead, its task is to situate the subject in the midst of this reality by making it 'possible to act purposefully' within incomprehensible social situations (Geertz, 1973). The goal of ideology is to single the individual or collective subject out of an abstract human mass, to 'animate' the subject into existence, as Judith Butler puts it (Butler, 1997). The anecdote reveals another important moment: hailing (or interpellation) works because it is expected. It is effective because there is a willingness — on the part of the emerging subject — to be addressed.

It is precisely this idea of the hailing expected from ideology that is important in discussing the state's symbolic role in defining veterans' identity. Veterans' stories of fragmentation describe a situation in which ideological state apparatuses have failed to deliver the anticipated call. The stories also outline the general dilemma of having a strong state-related identity in a weak state. The collapse of the context and institutions, which used to support such an identity, rarely activates a search for new identifications. Rather this withdrawal of the basic (and familiar) support reinforces a desire to maintain prior identities as firmly as possible. Imposed by the state and internalized by veterans, military self-perception is transformed into a generative cliché, into a social template that is expected to perform a necessary classifying function in times of peace. In the absence of ideological hailing in the postwar life, ex-servicemen are lost when they face the necessity of reentering a nonmilitarized society. Recurring attempts to reenact the traumatic experience in rituals and militarized employment, the attrac-



tion of 'banal militarism' as a way of avoiding difficulties of returning to civil life (Cock, 2005), are rooted precisely in this lack of nonmilitarized forms of interpellation by the state. It comes from the feeling, to use the veteran's phrase, that 'there is nothing' else to hang onto.

In many cases, the malfunctioning of the ideological state apparatuses was revealed through veterans' routine anthropomorphizing of the state: metaphors of the deaf state, the state that doesn't notice or doesn't hear were common in veterans' discussions. Yet what these metaphors displaced was not the demand for being heard but a desire to be hailed, addressed, and differentiated by the state.

During one of my interviews, after a veteran's long tirade about society's 'universal indifference' to their postwar lives, I tried to see if veterans themselves would be willing to reverse the dynamic by hailing the state and the public. I asked my interlocutor if he had ever tried to talk to local journalists or intelligentsia to draw public attention to his cause. The answer was negative. As this veteran insisted, people did not really need to know about the ordeal the soldiers had to go through in Chechnya. Instead, I was told, to understand what the veterans' experience was about 'everyone should watch *Saving Private Ryan*, a Steven Spielberg film (1998), in which a team of American soldiers is sent to rescue a paratrooper lost during the battle for Omaha Beach in Normandy in June 1944. Nikolai F., a participant in the first Chechen war, translated the meaning of this film about suffering and rewarding salvation in terms of the post-Soviet reality: 'If the state managed to turn us, civil people, young guys, into boeviki, well, not quite that, let's say, into warriors [voinov], into people who know how to fight, then the state should think hard about the way it can turn us back into civilians.' These expectations for the authoritative hailing were destined to remain futile. Once again, the state withdrew, unwilling and often incapable of addressing the complicated issue of soldiers' demobilization. The weak state became a state that betrayed.

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 (or the military operation in Afghanistan). My question about the goals of the war was 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. In displacing these 'whys' the veterans of the Chechen war were not original, though. 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 be following 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 (Hynes, 1997).

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' — (ibid.). What happens 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. 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 metaphoric

hor 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]'* ('gosudarstvo ne rasschitalos').

Ironically, by building their postwar 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. What seemed to be constant in both cases was the assumed understanding that the state was ultimately responsible not only for veterans' postwar economic dislocation but also for the crisis of their state-oriented identity. Both themes were deeply rooted in the recent Soviet past. Both also suggested important modifications that allow us to trace changes in relations among individuals, groups, and the state in post-Soviet Russia.

By the end of the 1980s, the Soviet state had created an elaborate (but not necessarily very effective) system of support for the veterans of the Second World War. Organized hierarchically (the type and number of benefits were associated with types of veterans' state awards and/or injuries), the system included special food and department stores for ex-servicemen, as well as personal privileges such as free housing, free or heavily discounted food packages, cars, medicine, health care, transportation, and other in-kind benefits. When in the middle of the 1980s veterans of the Afghan war — *afgantsy*, as they are usually called — started forming their first unions, they aimed at reproducing the benefit system created for the previous war's generation. In the early 1990s, the Russian state, unable to allocate any funding for social programs for Afghan war veterans or to deliver those programs in kind, decided to grant (or was lobbied into granting) significant tax privileges to organizations that united the most vulnerable category, injured and disabled ex-soldiers. In two special decrees in 1991 and 1993, President Yeltsin granted to three major umbrella organizations of Afghan war veterans complete immunity from excise duty on imported goods and foodstuffs and provided them with a set of tax incentives for conducting financial operations and for carrying out various types of entrepreneurial activity (Government acts, 1991, 1992, 1993)². The country was experiencing a sharp shortage of food and consumer products. Hence it was expected that the funds accumulated by the Union of Invalids from these operations would be spent on building housing and providing necessary medical and financial support for veterans³.

My Barnaul informant, Igor K., a leader of the Union of Veterans of the Chechen War, stressed the same point in a conversation, when he referred to the *afgantsy* as a path that Chechen war veterans preferred to avoid: *'Predominantly, it was not the veterans who took advantage of the privileges that were granted by the state to their organizations. The opportunity was seized by smarter and more competent civilians. Veterans were pushed overboard.'*

Given the rapidly changing political, economic, and ethical background, how could Chechen war veterans collectively and individually sustain their claims to the state's support in everyday life? There were still some signs of practices associated with the benefit system

² О Российском фонде инвалидов войны в Афганистане. 1991. Указ Президента РСФСР от 30 ноября 1991 г. № 248; О деятельности Союза ветеранов Афганистана (К постановлению от 9 августа 1988 года, № 989). Указ Президента РФ от 4 апреля 1992 г. № 362; О мерах государственной поддержки деятельности общественных объединений инвалидов. 1992. Указ Президента РФ от 22 декабря 1993 г. № 2254.

³ Frants Klintsevich, a member of the Russian parliament and a high-profile functionary of the All-Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan pointed out in 1997 that because of their cooperation with criminal groups, *afgantsy* foundations were able to pocket roughly one billion dollars (Шабуркин Александр. «Афганцы» опровергают обвинения в свой адрес / *Независимая газета*, 8 октября 1997 г.).



designed to support veterans of various Soviet military campaigns. However, a wide-scale implementation of this system was hardly possible even in the late 1990s. Taking the afgangtsy model as their main reference point, Chechen war veterans accommodated it to changing conditions.

There was much discussion about mutual support and mutual responsibility between the two generations of war veterans. Despite multiple and very significant differences, a considerable family resemblance between the two generations was obvious: Chechen war veterans often refer to themselves as 'younger brothers of *afgantsy*,' and their public identity *chechentsy*, as they call themselves (that is, Chechens, from Chechnya) is based on the same toponymic approach. Much of this similarity is determined by institutional proximity: the first groups of Chechen war veterans emerged in Barnaul as informal chapters of local unions of Afghan war veterans. Strengthened financially by privileges granted in the early 1990s, local foundations of afgangtsy provided a new generation of veterans with immediate financial and legal support, performing a consolidating function that used to be monopolized by the Komsomol organization. By the mid-1990s, a growing understanding of their own specific interests, taken together with the elimination of economic privileges and the negative public attitude toward afgangtsy, resulted in a new organization that united participants of the Chechen war in the region.

The Chechen war veterans' distancing from the previous generation of veterans was also provoked by a traditionally divisive practice of governmentality. Unlike Afghan veterans, whose postwar legal status had been determined by the law *On Veterans* (1994), which basically equated them with veterans of the Second World War, participants in the Chechen war had no legal framework that could outline or even clarify their postwar rights and entitlements. As previously indicated, the Russian government was careful not to frame the war in Chechnya as a war; officially, it was referred to as a counter-terrorist operation, or, at most, as combat or fighting activities (*boevye deistviia*) in the North Caucasus. Correspondingly, there were no war veterans but only participants in combat activities who were not covered by the existing law and were not eligible for the statewide subsidies or assistance that could be relevant in their case.

The unequal legal conditions of the two generations of veterans and the lack of civic identity attributed to Chechen war veterans produced tensions in sibling-like relations. One veteran described the source of this tension with the 'Afghan brothers' well: '*We are an independent organization, yet we are always together with [Afghan war veterans] on each and every question. The end result, though, is strange: we exist, but as if we don't matter. . . . We don't want to be in the role of extras anymore.*' Attempting to play their own independent role, Chechen war veterans in Barnaul founded a regional nongovernmental organization of invalids and former participants of military conflicts, *Bratstvo* (Fraternity). The organization was created in February 1997 after an annual festival of soldiers' songs established to commemorate the withdrawal of the Soviet Army from Afghanistan.

Despite its name, the main person behind this organization was a woman, Marina Shaul'skaia, who had no military experience but a good deal of expertise in social work. From the early 1990s Shaul'skaia was in charge of the department 'social benefits' of the Altai Union of Afghan Veterans. Throughout the 1990s, she also wrote scripts and directed all major public events of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, as well as Altai's afgangtsy. She managed to bring *chechentsy* together and to establish a vital connection with local power structures.

When I interviewed her in 2002, Shaul'skaia had already severed her ties with the Afghan and the Chechen war veteran movements. I asked her if there was any visible difference between these two generations. Referring to the idea of a post-Soviet ideological vacuum, she said, '*The Afghan war veterans had some limits, they still had something sacred. The younger [veterans of the Chechen war] have nothing of this. They are totally different. There was no ideology, and you could see what happened because of this. The [first] Chechen war was outside of*

ideology. Everybody was on his own, surviving. What was desired was not victory by any means, but prosperity at any price; a desire to get above everyone else.'

Shaul'skaia's comment notwithstanding, this emphasis on prosperity and individualism among chechentsy certainly had some resemblance to the social trajectory of Afghan war veterans. In the Chechen war veterans' case, there was a major financial reason that pushed this individualism even further. With the beginning of the war in Chechnya, financial subsidies to war veterans, abolished in the spring of 1995, returned. This time, however, subsidies came in a very different form: corporate taxbreaks and exemptions were replaced with individualized payments. At the end of 1994, the Ministry of Defense 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' (*boevye vyplaty*), as they are usually called, could easily come up to \$1,000 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 (Parlamentskaya gazeta, 20.09.2000; Izvestiya, 17.11.1995; Na strazhe rodiny, 28.09.2002; Agenstvo voennykh novostei, 09.1999). But payments were often delayed. To preclude robbery and murders associated with combat money, the Ministry of Defense started transferring funds to its local divisions that drafted soldiers in the first place rather than paying cash in Chechnya. However, money transfers frequently took several months or even years in some cases. In this situation, demobilized soldiers would get caught up in military red tape, which increased their sense of general dislocation (Svobodnyi kyrs, 23.11.2000). In Barnaul, the Union of Veterans of Chechnya, (UVC), an umbrella organization that enlisted more than two thousand individuals and several smaller organizations (Bratstvo included), spent a large part of its time helping veterans to secure their combat payments. The legal and accounting work associated with combat payment arrears was organized in the UVC by several women who were girlfriends or wives of veterans (as I was told). Veterans themselves, often not having received the education necessary for such paperwork, usually resorted to direct negotiations with local administrations. The individual nature of these monetary exchanges with the state helps explain why there was little collective action among veterans.

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 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 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' (Simmel, 1978). 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 recognition 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 (Appadurai, 1986). 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 postwar 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 postwar 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 graspable explanation.

There were other reasons that made veterans' military identity resurface, too. Postwar failures to find a way of making use of themselves, described by Vitalii, had much to do with veterans' backgrounds. Drafted mostly from rural areas of Altai, these men could hardly find employment after their return. Some ex-servicemen tried to find their way back to Chechnya or other hot spots and signed professional contracts with the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of the Interior. By one local estimate, up to 30 percent of all contracts in the region were signed by veterans of the Chechen (and other 'post-Soviet') wars. Other men, perhaps following an aggressive advertising campaign organized by the regional office of the Ministry of Defense, signed short-term agreements to go to Chechnya in order to 'earn enough money to buy fur coats for their wives, or new TV sets... Or just to save enough money so that they would not have to build their life from the zero-level,' as a contract military officer observed (Altayskaya pravda, 2002) (Picture 4).



Picture 4. An advertisement for army service: 'I choose contract service [in the army].' Barnaul, 2006. Photo by author.

But military contracts did not come automatically: in 2003 out of two thousand men who submitted their applications, only twelve hundred were able to land an actual job. Yet, as one military recruiter described it, contractors from the Altai region demonstrated a persistently negative tendency. Usually coming from low-income families, these military servicemen were often stupefied when confronted with their relatively high salaries: "When these guys get hold of normal money, they have no idea what to spend it on. So, they "invest" it in alcohol... We don't keep people like that"(Altaiskaya pravda, 2003).

The majority of veterans, however, did not return to the war and preferred to find a job at home. Still, all veterans with whom I spoke described their immediate postwar time as one long drinking binge, 'A 100 percent zapoi,' as one veteran called it. While not exactly new among Russian men (Pesmen, 2000), this type of zapoi has its own distinctive economy. Combat payments made these binges financially possible. In turn, a lack of permanent jobs and relatively independent lifestyle (very few veterans are married or have long-term partners) provided social conditions necessary for this type of behavior. To quote Oleg, a veteran of the first Chechen war,

In 1996, after that [Khasavyurt] peace agreement, we all came back to this normal, civilian life. <...> Nobody even tried to find a job during the first couple of months because mainly it was zapoi. <...> With veterans, I drank for two-three months. Joy came only in a bottle. The common goal was to get drunk. A common interest was to get drunk, talk about the war; about the way things were then, to recall something from that time, to get totally pissed off at the whole world, and to start a fight with someone while drunk. <...> We had no time for psychological rehabilitation.

Frequently, *zapoi* would mark an extended period of liminality, with no clear way out. The state of the local economy did not make the situation any better. Apart from Barnaul, the region was predominantly agricultural, with limited demand for a seasonal labor force, low salaries, lack of career perspectives, and unattractive working conditions. This 'zero opportunity variant' (nulevoi variant), as a veteran aptly termed it, often forced ex-servicemen to move to Barnaul, the biggest industrial center in the region. However, very few veterans had useful connections, marketable skills, or even clear plans for starting new, urban lives. Their job choices were determined by their previous military training. They tried militarized state institutions police, security service, fire brigades, or tax police first, usually with no success.

Veterans' lack of success in obtaining professional employment in the governmental sector gave rise to a particular conspiracy theory. Applying for a state job in security-related areas often involved a comprehensive medical checkup. While physical tests are usually passed without any significant problem, mandatory interviews with a psychotherapist often cut veterans off. As Oleg K., an active member of the Union of Chechen War Veterans framed it, *'I think, they just had a special policy to get rid of participants [of the Chechen war] during this medical checkup. Simply, they want to get rid of us.'* Oleg recollected that during the interview with a psychotherapist he was asked to guess a popular proverb from the description suggested by the doctor. The proverb seemed to be hard to recall, and getting anxious about the possibility of failing the crucial test, Oleg asked the doctor if she herself knew the proverb. The reaction was somewhat off-putting: 'Don't be rude, young man.' A verbal exchange between the psychotherapist and the veteran that followed right after that effectively resulted in the verdict that ended any aspiration for the state-related career: 'Not fit for the job' (ne goden).

It is because of experiences like this that veterans were reluctant to seek any psychological rehabilitation. Social workers and psychologists from the Men's Crisis Center, which was created in Barnaul precisely in order to help veterans of the Chechen war, unanimously told me that the center did not manage to attract the veterans' attention. Mentioning the 'Chechen syndrome,' a term widely used in the media to describe the postwar (and post-traumatic) condition of veterans (Svobodnyi kurs, 18.01.2001), could provoke a flurry of negative emotions



and angry accusations similar to the one I got during an interview with Nikolai F.: *'We veterans need no psychologist at all... You people have this understanding that if we fought a war it means we are imbeciles [duraki]! But in reality, a person who went through a war is prepared for life better than anyone else.'*

Failed psychological tests were not the only catalyst. Veterans' attempts to find jobs in the private sector provided plenty of similar examples. The military ID (*voennyi билет*) of each veteran of the Chechen war bears a clear stamp — 'participated in combat activity' (*uchastnik voennykh deistvii*) — and usually indicates the number of 'combat days' spent in Chechnya. Issued by the state, the ID must be submitted with a job application to a potential employer. Veterans were convinced that this stamp was often read by potential employers as a diagnosis, as another disqualifying stamp: 'Not fit for the job.'

The area where veterans did succeed in landing jobs was in private industry that required militarized skills. For example, after several months in his own village, with no job and no prospects, Viktor Z., a paratrooper, decided to move to Barnaul. He had neither close relatives nor friends in the city. For some time he managed to share a room with a man whom he had not known at all before, but who was a relative of a friend. His first big job was a security guard/doorman in a bar. In the interview, Viktor emphasized what appeared to be a very unusual fact. His first employer had needed neither recommendations nor background-check phone calls to hire him. Apparently surprised by the act of recognition that required no additional steps, the veteran continued: *'On their own, they themselves just personally accepted me [sami ot sebja lichno menia priniali]. And I started working; and people liked it. People would come and say, 'Glad to see you.' Even customers did that!'* The security job in the bar led to another position. A local businessman offered Viktor the job of a bodyguard/chauffeur. For two years Viktor drove this man and other businessmen around the town, accompanying them on business trips to other cities when needed. After meeting with several veterans who had organized a local Union of Veterans of the Chechen War, Viktor decided to quit the job in order to work full time in Bratstvo. As he put it, *'We had a discussion among ourselves, and decided that we just didn't like the way it was going on.'*

Viktor's decision to quit reflected a general feeling among veterans. 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.'*

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 quote 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 fighting for some higher-up who is somebody; we were just fighting for each other'* (Wong and others, 2003). It was exactly this bonding component that was missing from the postwar 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 World War II from the messy problem of the Stalinist legacy. 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. As if mirroring the disengaged state, veterans discovered

solutions of their problems in various forms of departure from the public sphere. In a reversed form, various images and practices of enclosed but understanding brotherhood provided striking illustrations of veterans' own notion of 'exit-less-ness' (*beziskhodnost'*): an experienced lack of entry into the world of the civilians was transformed into fantasies of a community of loss that walled itself off from the outsiders.

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