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Mothers, War, and State in Twenty-First-Century Russia: The Issue of Reform and Accountability

When the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers (CSM) was established in 1989 from a variety of locally founded charter organizations, the main political mission of its members was to campaign for civic-military accountability, the end of violent hazing, and the return of their fallen sons’ bodies. In the 1990s, Russian mothers were among the few to adopt an open anti-war stance against the Soviet and, later, Russian conflicts in Afghanistan, the Central Asian republics, and Chechnya. Over the past decade, however, this position has become difficult to uphold for activist mothers hoping to maintain visibility, in part because their organization’s original goals have been achieved to some extent. Since 2008, military reforms have shortened the term of conscription in an effort to limit internal violence and hazing and have introduced voluntary two-year contracts as a supplement. After the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the Ministry of Defense promised mothers of conscripts that their sons would not be sent to “hot zones.” While representatives of committees of soldiers’ mothers have found new roles as mediators within contemporary civic-military relations and have broadly supported the reforms, some feel that old problems persist—and that others have worsened—under these new guises and are working to bring them back to the forefront of civil discourse in Russia.

Among the most vocal dissenters is Valentina Mel'nikova, the head of the Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia (UCSMR). She has spoken out repeatedly against the secretive nature of Russia’s involvement in the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine, seeking to defend the rights of mothers who are denied contact with their sons or access to their bodies when they are killed. She laments, however, what she sees as the passivity and irresponsibility of many of
these mothers as well as a lapse in civil transparency and accountability evinced by defense officials. Images of mothers’ sons dying in Eastern Ukraine affect the public conscience less strongly than during any of Russia’s previous conflicts, in large part because the Russian government officially denies the involvement of active Russian troops in the region.¹ Mothers of soldiers and the activists who support them now face a quandary as they judge whether the CSM, in the process of cooperating with the state to develop a long-sought system of feedback and response, has also become an extension of the state at the cost of anti-war activism and the representation of discontented voices.

In 2018, Jennifer Mathers asserted in an editorial for The Conversation that civil organizations such as the CSM have tempered the Russian president’s deployment of soldiers into combat in Eastern Ukraine. She concludes that committees of soldiers’ mothers “are at the forefront of the grassroots campaign to demand an honest account of Russia’s involvement in Ukraine.”² Although Brenda Vallance emphasizes that the majority of committees of soldiers’ mothers are not anti-military and “believe in the state’s need to maintain the armed forces for security,” she also highlights their anti-war stance. During the First Chechen War, this took the form of peace marches, such as the Mother’s March for Compassion, and various protests staged by the CSM.³ Marybeth Ulrich likewise comments in her treatise on post-Soviet military-civil relations that in most marches the mothers’ main complaint was that untrained conscripts were being sent into combat and “not that the war was unjust or that the intervention should not have taken place.” Nonetheless, the fevered energy of the mothers who campaigned to end the war and bring back their sons represented one of the few acts of civil resistance to a war that signaled a

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¹ See Walker.
² Mathers.
³ Vallance, 11–12.
return to “Soviet pre-democratic practices.” Although it may not have always originated from a place of ideological principle, the activism of mothers’ committees during these years was one of only a few examples of explicit opposition to the Chechen Wars.

Mothers are, in fact, among the few demographic groups well positioned in Russian society to adopt an anti-war stance. In a study of anti-war web activism, Markku Lonkila notes that Russia’s conscription policy discourages young men who either have served or may be drafted from engaging in modes of activism that “openly confront the state and the army.” He associates this with Russia’s inherited tradition, dating to World War II (the “Great Patriotic War”), of martial reverence and the stigma that faced male dissenters. Mothers, in contrast, were enabled by political exclusion and their “motherist” identities to march by the hundreds to Chechnya during the First Chechen War in order to chastise the actions of their own sons and bring them home. Aurélie Lacassagne goes so far as to argue that by standing against the conflict, the soldiers’ mothers played “a major role in turning public opinion against the first war.” Concern for their children’s lives led many of these mother activists beyond petitioning for the return of their sons to protesting the war itself. On the other hand, Serguei Oushakine notes that during the 1990s, faced with a national ideological void after the collapse of the Soviet Union, mothers of fallen soldiers demanded the return of an ideological, state-driven justification for their sons’ deaths. Provincial umbrella charters of the CSM strongly resisted the rhetorical shift of labeling the War in Afghanistan a “grave error” rather than an “international duty.”

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4 Ulrich, 100.
5 Lonkila, 1128.
6 See Zawilski.
7 Lacassagne, 163.
8 Oushakine, 209–12.
motivations of provincial and nation-wide activists continues to be important in understanding the problems faced by anti-war mother activists today.

When addressing Russia’s current involvement in conflicts in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, Mel'nikova does not echo Mather’s notion that mothers are playing a key role in demanding accountability from Putin or the Ministry of Defense. Her UCSMR, which split from the mainstream CSM in 1998, has taken a sharply critical attitude toward reports of the cover-up of fatalities in the regions. Along with the heads of several regional committees of soldiers’ mothers, she has spoken out against the coerced signing of conscripts into supposedly voluntary two-year contracts while lamenting mothers’ passivity toward information regarding their sons’ fates. Yet the nature of Russia’s involvement in Eastern Ukraine, which has shifted from reliance on large-scale and overt deployment of conscripts to select and covert usage of volunteer contract soldiers and mercenaries, has frustrated their attempts to revive a spirit of anti-war opposition. The troubles facing mothers’ organizations point to their gradual incorporation into the state and the sublimation of their independent activist interests to those of the Ministry of Defense and army.

Mel'nikova recalls Russia’s intervention in South Ossetia almost ten years earlier, when military commissioners blatantly violated their promises not to send conscripts into hot zones, and mothers’ committees received a high volume of petitions from the parents of soldiers. They were then able to obtain confessions from loose-lipped bureaucrats, demonstrating that while civic-military relations were not perfect, they at least had a measure of transparency.9 With the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, however, much has changed. Mel'nikova states in a 2015 interview, “What prevents the parents from coming to us and slowing down—by law!—their own sons’ conscription process? Nothing! When I ask the parents, ‘Are you not afraid, knowing that Russia is waging a

9 See Lenta.ru.
war?’ they respond, ‘It’s nothing; no one is being sent to the Donbas.’” She says that even when those mothers who do worry about deployments call her office, they do not travel to their sons’ bases, as mothers did during the First Chechen War, or behave as proactively as they did in 2008.

Does this mean that the mothers who Mel'nikova believes are starting to “carry themselves passively” suddenly lost their political consciousness between 2008 and 2014? On the contrary, many simply believe that the problems that long plagued the Russian army in times of war and peace have eased in the last decade. Oushakine notes that during the First and Second Chechen Wars, mothers of soldiers who died because of negligence, abuse, or friendly fire were often underserved in comparison to mothers of soldiers who died in combat. The latter received pensions and recognition at gatherings while the former “were completely excluded from these commemorative rituals” and found it difficult to gain the attention of local government. The military reforms initiated in 2008 and continued under Putin’s second term aimed to improve the fighting capabilities of the Russian army but also to counter the infamous dedovshchina, or rule of second-term conscripts, that long resulted in abuse and death in the barracks. To this end, the reforms cut periods of military conscription from two years to one; enlisting for the longer terms served by contract soldiers could be voluntary. This accompanied a general effort to improve military capabilities following the Russo-Georgian War, during which deficiencies in the Russian armed forces were apparent. Although the reforms were not entirely successful in eradicating abuse in the army, the state’s position did begin “to converge with the civic claims of committees

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10 Что мешало родителям прийти к нам и тормознуть—по закону!—собственных детей при призыве? Ничего! Когда я спрашиваю пап и мам: “Вы в курсе, что Россия ведет войну, за детей не страшно?”, они отвечают, “Ой, да никого на Донбасс не посылают.” Mel'nikova. All translations are the author’s own unless otherwise noted.
11 See ibid.
12 Oushakine, 252.
13 See Daucé, 37.
of soldiers’ mothers.” The concept of “ethnic dedovshchina,” or kavkazshchina (referring to violence committed by Caucasian conscripts), replaced traditional dedovshchina as an excuse for persistent abuses, adding an element of grassroots xenophobia but not necessarily of pacifism.

Mel'nikova would find in the statements of Flera Salikhovskaia, head of the CSM, some of the same passivity that she associates with the falling rate of appeals to the UCSMR’s offices. Salikhovskaia appears less critical of this phenomenon and regards it as a sign that problems like dedovshchina are ebbing. She believes that recent positive changes in the army can be traced to the replacement of former Minister of Defense Anatolii Serdiukov with Sergei Shoigu and seeks to continue the work she carried out as a “meeting woman” during the 1980s, this time in close cooperation with the state. While mothers’ organizations often had antagonistic relationships with past administrations, Salikhovskaia asserts that “with the arrival of Shoigu, everything in the army very suddenly changed,” referring to the “sadism” that characterized the dedovshchina she fought against in the 1990s. The unintended effect of a reform for which many activist mothers have long fought is the decreasing relevance of their own committees as autonomous activist organizations. To achieve their former autonomy, they have the option of speaking out against Russia’s military activities, but whether they will have a receptive audience is uncertain.

Many of Salikhovskaia’s opinions regarding military reform reveal an embrace of the nationalism espoused by Putin’s administration. In an interview given only days after Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, Salikhovskaia stated that she supports Shoigu’s policies because “our

14 Ibid., 40.
15 Ibid., 41.
16 See Laruelle, 273.
17 Salikhovskaia, “Flera Salikhovskaia: Kogda vstal vopros o registratsii Komiteta soldatskikh materei, ia zaregistrirovala ego v svoei kvartire.”
committee does not want to become a country like Ukraine.”

Journalist Masha Gessen regards the takeover of Crimea as part of Putin’s attempt to create a “Russian world” as envisioned by right-wing ideologues like Alexander Dugin and thus prevent the creep of Western liberalism into Russia through Ukraine. Although demonstrating Salikhovskaia’s alignment with Duginist politics falls outside the scope of this essay, she displays, at the very least, a desire to re-establish traditional nationalist and military values. After stating her refusal to help conscripts seeking to avoid military service, she says, “Shoigu is doing all he can to ensure that deviationists do not appear among our kids.”

Salikhovskaia’s support for the reintroduction of military preparatory training into primary schools also reflects a belief that the armed forces should reclaim a central role as a social institution. Her current convictions indicate a rejection of the anti-war activism that the CSM practiced during the First Chechen War.

Salikhovskaia also supports the Ministry of Defense’s policy on contract soldiers. Commenting on the decisions of soldiers who volunteered to fight in the Donbas, she remarks that if such a person had “dedicated himself to warfare, he does not know any other trade” and that “those who have not found themselves in civilian life […] and those who could not find work […] should be allowed to go there [to Ukraine].” She specifically defends Ukrainian-born soldiers who fight on the pro-Russian side in Eastern Ukraine, saying, “They are our Russian comrades,

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18 Мы в нашем комитете не хотим, чтобы у нас в стране было, как на Украине, поэтому мы поддерживаем политику Шойгу. Salikhovskaia, “Flera Salikhovskaia: Kogda uslyshala, chto Serdiukov poprosil amnistiiu, ia chut' so stula ne upala.”
19 See Gessen, 428–34.
20 Сейчас Шойгу делает все для того, чтобы не было уклонистов среди ребят. Salikhovskaia, “Flera Salikhovskaia: Kogda uslyshala, chto Serdiukov poprosil amnistiiu, ia chut' so stula ne upala.”
21 See Gessen, 377, 425.
22 Если человек посвятил себя военному делу, он не знает другой специальности. […] Те, которые не нашли себя в гражданской жизни […] и не смог найти работы. Они могли поехать туда. RIA Novosti.
but their homeland is Ukraine, where their parents and family remained. Of course, if they are on leave, it is their right to go to Ukraine.”

While not openly admitting to the deployment of army troops, the Kremlin, Laruelle argues, “has permitted Russian nationalist movements to get involved in the conflict by occupying a grey area in which the authorities neither approve nor disapprove of their activities.”

Taras Kuzio, however, does note that Putin’s rhetoric against Ukrainian nationalism is modeled after the cult of the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany and thus equates Ukrainian nationalists with the Soviet and Russian conceptions of fascism as a Western-funded anti-Russian threat. This recreates an ideological rationalization for Russia’s military actions that the mothers of the Altai CSM researched by Oushakine might have actually longed for in the 1990s. Having been deprived of the “international duty” that the Soviet government offered as a rationalization for the Afghan War, the mothers of fallen soldiers did not blame Boris Yeltsin for entering Chechnya, but rather for “destroying the state, along with the state’s ability to protect its own people.”

Although Salikhovskaia does not vigorously advocate for intervention in Ukraine, her comments at least betray a lack of anti-war principles and reveal her commitment to a nationalist rationalization for Russia’s wars.

Salikhovskaia expresses support for volunteer fighters, but she has refused to confirm reports that soldiers who did not voluntarily sign contracts were sent to Ukraine, and she echoes the Ministry of Defense’s official denials of the allegation. In contrast, Mel'nikova has cited those same reports as evidence that conscripts’ rights continue to be violated. In an interview from

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23 Они наши российские товарищи, но родина-то их Украина, где у них остались родители, родня. Конечно, если он был в отпуске—это его право, он может поехать на Украину. Ibid.
24 Laruelle, 275.
25 See Kuzio, 94–95.
26 Oushakine, 254.
27 See Vzgliad.
December 2014, Mel'nikova criticized the Russian government for sending forces into Ukraine without identifying insignia, an act that violates the Geneva Convention and thus allows Ukrainian forces to shoot at them without legal consequences. The deleterious effects of deploying covert fighters were seen in Syria in February 2018, when dozens of mercenaries from the paramilitary group ChVK Wagner were killed in a US airstrike. The strike occurred after Russian operators refused to identify their own combatants to their American counterparts. Natal'ia Zhukova, director of the Nizhnii Novgorod CSM branch, notes that after such incidents, mothers of mercenaries are hesitant to demand their sons’ bodies, lest they forfeit their paychecks from ChVK Wagner or similar organizations. Consequently, mercenaries and contract soldiers fighting without insignia are buried in the countries of their death, in both Syria and Ukraine.

This problem extends to prisoners of war as well. Mel'nikova criticized the Ministry of Defense for refusing to recognize Victor Ageev, a Russian soldier captured in Eastern Ukraine in 2017, as a serviceman and thus potentially endangering his life. She laments that the government abandons its soldiers as it never had in any previous war and echoes Zhukova’s assessment that soldiers’ families are “somehow being bribed.” Mel'nikova also has suggested that not all purported volunteers and mercenaries are willingly serving as such. She cited an incident in which a mother complained to her that her son’s commander forced him to sign a service contract when the fighting in the Donbas was at its peak. If he refused, “the commander himself would sign him up and send him to Luhansk.” Mel'nikova emphasizes, however, that due to censorship and

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28 See Schmidt.
29 See Barysheva.
30 То ли они боятся, то ли их как-то чем-то подкупают, то ли им наплевать на своих родных. Ekho Moskvy.
31 [И]м необходимо подписать контракт, в противном случае он сам подпишет его за них и отправит в Луганск. Schmidt.
disinformation the majority of Russians do not hear about such incidents, or if they do, they dismiss them as propaganda. In this way, she claims, the state fosters a culture of passivity.

Due in part to a combination of censorship and financial difficulty, the voices of dissenting mothers like Mel'nikova are being drowned out. In 2012 she was forced to close the UCSMR’s Moscow office because of a lack of funding from the Russian government and international NGOs. In 2014 Liudmila Bogatenkova, the head of a local committee of soldiers’ mothers in Stavropol, was detained and accused of fraud after she published lists of hundreds of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine. Organizations that speak out against the conduct of the war in Ukraine also face the risk of being labeled foreign agents. In 2004, the government initiated a policy to strictly monitor mothers’ committees that criticized the state and received funding from foreign NGOs. Russian Parliament also passed laws in 2012 requiring organizations that receive overseas funding to register as foreign agents, resulting in their subjection to “paralyzing financial reporting requirements [that] would serve as a scarlet letter.” The Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg were labeled a foreign agent in 2014, despite not having received a grant in months, and they were only removed from the list in 2018 after extensive appeals. Gessen argues that such laws are the “perfect tools of a crackdown: vague enough to put millions on notice […] they served as messages […] and signaled that the Kremlin was in charge, that strict order was being reconstituted.” A more immediate effect they may have on the committees is the further discouragement of investigations and anti-war demonstrations like the ones during the First Chechen War.

32 See Interfax.
34 See Oushakine, 213.
35 Gessen, 379.
36 See Moscow Times.
37 Gessen, 380.
The groups that continue to work closest with the Ministry of Defense and receive extensive funding, such as the CSM under Salikhovskaia, refrain from dissent and are incorporated into the defense bureaucracy. Salikhovskaia herself has become an influential member on the Civil Council for the Ministry of Defense.38 This, however, is not an entirely unanticipated development. Lacassagne argues that during Putin’s first term as president, there was a “renaissance of traditional Russian nationalist discourse” that saw the women’s anti-war movement attacked because it challenged the Soviet “hero’s mother myth.”39 According to Valerie Zawilski, this myth consists of two archetypes: the “suffering mother” and the “strong woman.”40 Lacassagne contends that in order to restore Russian nationalism and, by extension, Russian masculinity, the archetype of the “suffering mother” must yield to that of the “strong woman.” She concludes that in pursuit of this aim Putin’s government combined censorship with efforts to turn Russian women against the anti-war activities of mothers’ groups and silence critical voices. Today, while Salikhovskaia’s CSM enjoys state support, Mel’nikova’s UCSMR and other anti-war groups face difficulty and obstinacy when speaking out against the deployment of soldiers to Ukraine.

For various reasons, the majority of Russian soldiers’ mothers do not engage in dissent and appear content or indifferent regarding the military’s current actions. This is not, however, entirely a result of the top-down coercion that Lacassagne describes. One of the most insightful observations in Vallance’s monograph examining mothers’ committees is the implicit irony of the fact that many of their goals “would in fact aid in making the military a more effective institution,” since “dedovshchina clearly detracts from the command structure of the military and thus limits

38 See Salikhovskaia, “Flera Salikhovskaia: Kogda vstal vopros o registratsii Komiteta soldatskikh materei, ia zaregistrirovala ego v svoei kvartire.”
39 Lacassagne, 163.
40 Zawilski, 230.
its effectiveness.” Mothers like Salikhovskaia have not sold out their ideals; rather, they view the 2008 reforms as the realization of a long-sought goal. Having gained a safer army, a system for civil coordination with military representatives, and the prospect of further reforms, Salikhovskaia may see a greater cost-benefit in denying reports of forced marches to Eastern Ukraine. The renewed ideological dimension to Russia’s military and state endeavors must also be satisfying to the same regional activist mothers who were deprived of one following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The decreased visibility of Russia’s armed deployments will likely continue to play a factor in military reform and the role of mothers in it. From the Soviet-Afghan War through the Russo-Georgian War, Valentina Mel'nikova frequently received proactive appeals from soldiers’ mothers. South Ossetia, however, was the last conflict zone into which Russian conscripts were sent en masse, despite the Ministry of Defense’s promises. The 2008 reforms have led to the passivity among soldiers’ mothers that Mel'nikova decries. Attempts by a few committees to promote an anti-war stance, bringing awareness to the human cost that persists in low-scale intervention, are likely to continue to be frustrated as long as the majority of soldiers’ mothers either support, or are indifferent to, the revival of ideological nationalism. Additionally, most mothers no longer hear about their sons dying on television, so their indifference is likely to persist.

The experience of mothers’ organizations in twenty-first-century Russia thus demonstrates the double-edged effect that reform and close cooperation with the state can have on independent activists.

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41 Vallance, 11.
42 Lenta.ru.
**Works Cited**


