

The Law of the Mother

Soldiers' Mothers and the Post-Soviet Army

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"Here is an example, comrades women: when one sells the house, there are two people involved: a buyer and a seller...Though we blame the army, we still give our children to it. No matter what, the officers are with our children [for 2 years]. Let's agree then: it is a kind of Holy Trinity. First, it is us, mothers. We give you, the military men, our children...Then you return them back to us. Who is the third? Those who finance you. There is no one else".

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Over the past decade I have studied the unique position of the Soviet and post-Soviet 'mother' as a political subject, activist, political innovator (of the 1990s), and as a citizen with unique rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the Bolshevik government and Soviet society. Today I am more convinced than ever that the radical political and social work done by Soviet and post-Soviet mothers must become a matter of wider cultural, philosophical and, in particular, political debate – though I am less optimistic of the latter either within academia, or on the streets. At the same time, I would caution against the use of sweeping generalisations and essentialist comparisons in any effort to connect this particular form of 'maternal' politics to mothers' movements elsewhere – be they in South America or India.

Like mothers of Russian soldiers, I am aware of the work done in this field by organisations and movements in other parts of the world. I am more pessimistic with regard to any 'global' maternal politics, since I believe that the effectiveness of the post-Soviet situation (of Soldiers' Mothers' work) is directly related to social, political and cultural conditions specific to a space and time. The ongoing process initiated by the Bolsheviks in 1917 enabled a radical shift in the figure of the Russian 'mother'. From her role and status as a family member, part of a more or less organised group of women who demanded

answers from a government they considered responsible for the death of their sons, the 'mother' became a political citizen-subject who demanded a radical transformation of society as a whole, beginning with the judicial system and the army (Aristarkhova, 1995).

What this transformation implies within the post-Soviet political climate, as well as within the crisis of traditional party politics, I have discussed elsewhere (Aristarkhova, 1999). Here I would like to focus on particular strategies that members of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers employ in their legal work, and the consequences of their strategies in relation to the deconstruction of the notion of government 'ownership' of the soldier. The results of much activity undertaken by the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers across Russia and the former USSR cannot be explained by anything other than specific local conditions, mentalities and political situations. If at all their experience is crucial for other contexts, it is in how sensitive they have been to those conditions, how sensitive and sincere, and how much part of them. Or, as one of them told me, "We, ourselves, have not thought it would have such an effect".

Soldiers' Bodies as Cannon Fodder: Military Law Meets the Mother

In Russia, military recruits are commonly referred to as 'cannon fodder' (*pushechnoe myaso*). Certainly, this attitude to a 'young male body' is not specific to Russian society. If this body is from poor classes (working, peasant, etc.), ethnic minority groups, or those who are persecuted or 'outlawed' in some other way, strategies are developed to ensure that it ends up in some dangerous zone where, voluntarily or not, it would be destroyed in the interest of war or of peace (serving in the police, the army, prison systems, medical experiments, religious/fundamentalist militia, etc.). There is a significant demand for 'young male meat' in these markets, worldwide.

From the military point of view, there are two efficient legal ways to obtain that meat: first, by offering a profession (by signing the contract, recruits sell their bodies to the military in exchange for a salary, scholarship, housing, food, clothing, security, depending on the situation); and second, acquiring recruits through mandatory national military service – conscription.

Throughout the centuries, in various contexts, those who have also had a stake in the 'young male body' have tried to shape the way in which it is used for the purposes of war in particular. During the times of so-called peace, there might be some idea that the army makes 'men out of boys'. During war, this idea is less popular among other stakeholders, such as parents, civil society groups, extended family and village communities, as well as friends and the 'young male bodies' themselves.

Law is needed when the community does not want to self-organise. The key word here is 'needed'. Without it, a particular result cannot be achieved. So, it is out of impotence – or resistance? – that the law is born. Impotence to do by means other than the law: by persuasion, by duty, by inherent impetus, by desire, by ethics, by common sense. If young male bodies would voluntarily submit *en masse* to recruitment, like sacrificial lambs, or like sheep herded into a meadow, one would not need a law to ensure that they experience the 'honour' of military service. If *all* parents would willingly give their male children away at the age of 12 or 15 or 21 willingly, or at least as a patriotic and social duty, there would be no

need for law.

A large amount of academic literature has been devoted to the topic of the 'male body and subjectivity' in relation to the state, the family, the 'mother' and the military. These studies are mostly based on Western philosophical, psychoanalytic or anthropological insights, and point out how deeply the question of masculinity and gender roles is linked to social organisation, especially incarnated in institutions such as the government, the family and the army. Without denying the importance of such research, and allowing for my own interest in alternatives to patriarchal ways of thinking, feeling and organising communal life, I feel that very often when we say 'maternal' or 'mother', we refer mostly to so-called 'pre-Oedipal' early experience, understood symbolically, biologically, socially, physically, etc. However, the 'mother' as a political subject-citizen is rarely a focus of academic discourse other than in relation to fields traditionally associated with women, such as reproductive technologies and the raising of children.

The Legality of War: Post-Soviet 'Mothers' Defy Russian History

In 1998, The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers was renamed The Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (UCSMR). It reflected the change in the number, scope and political standing of the committees across Russia as a whole. It also reflected the close networking and grassroots nature of the work in various geographical regions across Russia's huge terrain. But even more significantly, it is a response to the mechanisms of militarisation: its barracks, its weapons programmes, its use of soldiers' bodies to do 'slave work' at various construction projects, as well as the problems of defending a vast land with very long borders; too much to 'guard' and 'protect'.

The phenomenon of the UCSMR (commonly referred to as 'The Mothers' in Russian political and media discourse) can best be evaluated through the impact of their work. It is still not clear (both to the group itself and also to external observers) why the Russian government, and especially, the Russian military apparatus, finds it difficult to ignore The Mothers or simply treat their work and demands as 'topical' and of limited effect. On the surface, it might be even more surprising that Russian military and legal representatives collaborate with The Mothers on a day-to-day basis on a number of essential issues in law and practice. Most 'non-mothers', human rights and non-governmental organisations, including the influential Western-based Greenpeace, Amnesty International, *Médecins sans Frontières* (Doctors without Borders), etc., fail to influence the Russian government with regard to its policies and presence in Chechnya and other 'hot spots'. Ignoring soldiers' mothers has been the 'normal' ongoing governmental practice in most countries, both in the West and elsewhere. The most recent example, of course, is Donald Rumsfeld's use of the new technologies, when letters addressed to the families of US 'cannon fodder' who recently died in Iraq were machine instead of hand-signed.

Unlike the American media that asks questions in such cases, though obviously there are no serious repercussions for the US authorities, Russians only smile at such Western scandals ("If only we had *their* problems..."). They still cynically believe that for any politician, 'young male meat' is mainly good for one thing: to be sent to fight a war that is related to someone else's political and economic interests. As a result, Russians

themselves cannot comprehend why the UCSMR's impact, influence, and the organisation itself, are not disappearing from the post-Soviet political and social stage.

Here we have a few *babushkas* who somehow have been forcing the Russian government to actually change its laws regarding the army, military service, the channels of communication between soldiers and society, etc. What 'the mothers' demand, even if not implemented directly or immediately, still finds its way into the parliament. The most recent move on their part is a direct response to the change in President Vladimir Putin's political strategy. In a situation of total collapse of party politics; in the absence of any meaningful party ideology that has social credibility (and not only in Russia); when the electorate in the so-called democratic countries mostly chooses between 'very bad' and 'bad', and votes not 'for', but 'against' (NOT Bush, NOT Yanushenko, NOT ultra-right), The Mothers have decided to become a registered political party – 'The Party of Soldiers' Mothers'.

Conscription: Male Gender as a Curse

The situation for recruits in the Russian army has been bad for centuries. It has been a model for prisons and other social institutions, transferring its practices across various layers of society. Poor classes supplied 'free labour' to the Russian state long before the Soviet regime made use of workers' bodies for rapid industrialisation and massive projects such as road-building in Siberia. What most Western countries have been doing, mediated by geographical distance, in their colonies and in new labour markets, Russia has been doing to foreigners closest at hand, 'ethnic minorities' on the land that it has occupied, and to (most) male Russians.

Since the break-up of the USSR, it has been common knowledge that it is better to have female rather than male children. State feminism has to do with it, in part, but the main factor lies in simple pragmatic accounting. It is a unique situation: created first by centuries of forced labour, enslavement of the poor, the peasantry and others of low status; second, by the particularly brutal attitude towards human life in the army during compulsory military service (a policy for almost 25 years); and third, by constant periods of war in an effort to appropriate more land from Russia's neighbours, or defend what has been occupied. According to UN statistics on life expectancy, it is clear that the republics of the former USSR (such as Ukraine, Belarus and Russia) have the highest difference between male and female life expectancy in the world: a difference of 10-12 years, more or less. In most developed countries, women live five years longer than men, on the average. But for women to live so much longer is unique to Russia.

Like most Christian countries in the West, Russia has been a patrilineal society, and subscribed to patriarchal laws and customs. However, the current trend of 'not preferring boys' was earlier helped by a number of new laws introduced in the Soviet period, when previous patriarchal property, family and education legislation was changed to render girls and boys of equal status, and often privilege 'the mother'. In the USSR, earlier disdain for a 'traditional bourgeois family', when a housewife was considered a product of the 'old order', meant, paradoxically, that women had more say in family planning than men. For decades, men traditionally have not participated equally in decisions related to having

children, how many and when – it was a ‘woman’s issue’, of lower status, so to speak. Most of the time a woman herself decided it – with or without consultation and discussion with her boyfriend or husband. The situation was fluid, open, and left to the agency of the mother and father, rather than the general community. Despite the widespread belief in the ‘participatory’ role of the Soviet state in family planning, this period is more characterised by the state *granting* reproductive rights and the status of ‘individual’ to women, rather than women being seen as autonomous individuals, with agency and the capacity to fight for their rights.

If one is going to become a parent in Russia today, one knows that:

- 1) There is a war in Chechnya that has been going on for 10 years, with poor provisions for the Russian soldiers who are sent there indiscriminately and in unpredictable manner.
- 2) Alcoholism and drug addiction rates are growing, and as a result, death from AIDS, combined with deaths from accidents and epidemics, have established male life expectancy at 61-62 years, and female life expectancy at 72-73 years.
- 3) Symbolic patriarchal ‘value’ placed on a boy is more and more substituted by an individualised preference by one or both parents,

Whom would YOU prefer? Especially if one does not really care whether it is a boy or a girl – the child can be of any gender, all one wants, like any *normal* parent, is that the child should be happy and healthy. Would you want him to die in Chechnya or another ‘hot spot’ of anti-terrorist operations? Would you want your child to live to be 61 or 72 years, statistically? One might not want to go for an embryo sex screening, but it would be *normal* to suggest that a parent would want a girl in Russia – *just in case*. This situation of ‘just in case’ creates an atmosphere of anxiety among the parents of boys, who have to start early in planning how to deal with the negative Russian record on male life expectancy that is often sharply reduced during military service. And if death happens while the ‘young male meat’ is in the army, Russians rarely consider it to be ‘fate’ or ‘accident’.

Mother/Citizen Articulation

What follows are two extended quotations that clearly show how soldiers’ mothers work with the military establishment to achieve demilitarisation. Mothers question the State – as mothers, and simultaneously as legally embedded citizens. Unfortunately, Russian academics and activists are slow to document, learn from and reflect upon the work of Russian soldiers’ mothers, their localised political and legal interventions. What does the enactment of such a possibility imply? Where else, if not in Russia and in post-Soviet times, could such a combination not only exist, but actually function?

These materials are taken from the materials of the USMR Congresses that took place in Moscow in 2000 and 2002. First, Kuklina Ida Nikolayevna clearly connects the notions of ‘mother’ and ‘citizen’ in her speech at the Second International Congress of Soldiers’ Mothers in Moscow. Second, General Nikolai Kurta, a Russian army ideologist, presents his version of how the work between soldiers’ mothers and the army should be organised.

Together, these speeches enable us to understand how the Law of the Mother penetrates the current military law and political context in post-Soviet Russia.



Kuklina Ida Nikolaeva, member of the Moscow Committee of Soldiers' Mothers.
Extract from presentation at the II International Congress of Soldiers' Mothers,
2 February 2000, Moscow.

"I plan to speak about things that you know very well. My speech would not have much novelty, in general. It is a strange coincidence that we are gathered in this hall again after five years. I am going to speak, however, not only about the war. The war, surely, is the most painful. At the same time, more importantly, we need to discuss at this Congress what has happened in the last five years, evaluate it, and consider what is next. Five years have passed – and what is next? We had the war then, we have it now. All the committees that are represented here, we have not started recently, we have lots of experience. So, what is next?...Here is what we have achieved, a list, without much commentary:

"First, we have won the amnesty for *begunki* (deserters) and for the participants of the first Chechen war.

"Second, we have won the continuing funding of the 124th laboratory. It is already six years since this work of search and identification of the missing soldiers and civilians has been established, with subsequent proper burial of the dead. We have this laboratory working, and the corpses of our soldiers are not anymore eaten by dogs, as was happening in Chechnya in 1995. This is our direct achievement.

"Third, the number of casualties is being announced publicly, lower than in reality or not, but it is announced now, unlike during the first Chechen war.

"Fourth, for the first time the generals are saying (sic) that they care about the soldier's life. My opinion is that they are just saying it. But still – it is the first time, it was not happening before.

"Fifth, they send (recruits) to war only after the initial six months of training. Sometimes earlier, but it is considered against the law, still. You see, here we have another small achievement. Of course, we can also add that soldiers are now paid, that their lives are better insured, but these are not ours, not our achievement.

"Let's move on now. What have we lost?...We have lost a 'governmental (state) decision' as we called it in our Executive Committee: a governmental decision to move towards a professional army. Let's compare what we have gained with what we have lost – not as the

soldiers' mothers, but as Russia's male and female citizens (*grazdane i grazdanki*). We have gained nothing!

"As we were losing lives and health of recruits then, we are losing it now. Not as mothers anymore, but as citizens of our country. In wartime and in peacetime. It is a myth that generals protect the lives of their soldiers...Take newspapers, and see: when was the beginning and the end of the first war? And how long is the second? Take the official number of casualties that generals are presenting. We had the number for the first war, now finally we have more or less regular numbers for the second, announced on television and in the newspaper *Red Star* (*Krasnaya Zvezda*). Calculate the number of casualties per month. Now we are losing more than in the first war. It is an illusion that they protect soldiers' lives more now. The horrific fact, already mentioned, is the possibility of this war to continue indefinitely. Calculate by yourselves, by your own hand, and see that this war is more bloody even by officially given numbers of casualties. This is what we've lost as Russia's citizens.

"As taxpayers, we are losing our money that goes to support the army. Soldiers are killed in peaceful times. Our money is used to make boys suicidal, deserters, and the like. And we continue to lose the money. We are told now that we fight for the preservation of the integrity of Russian territory. Yes, I agree completely that there is a threat to the integrity to our country. But it is impossible to preserve it by military means. One cannot keep the territorial integrity by force eternally. It does not work this way – one day it will surely collapse. There is only way of shared everyday living, shared interests to preserve that integrity. And what shared interests do we have now with Chechnya? The war only separates us.

"*Have I lost or have I gained, as a Russian citizen, the integrity of Russia as a result of the war in Chechnya?* This question is, pardon, undecided. And nobody can tell how it will be decided. And of course, I have lost from the fact that now in one part of my country, we practically have a lawless military rule. Or call it 'state of emergency' and a 'curfew' situation...So, the war for me, as a Russian citizen, remains illegal, though it is called various names. First we were fighting against an "aggression in Dagestan". It was a war, but not on paper, legally. Then we had "sanitary cordoning off Chechnya", and the war was called "a construction of sanitary cordoning". Then it became, quickly, an "anti-terrorist operation". As a Russian citizen, I am losing in this war. And the situation in Russia has not stabilised...

"What do we want?

"Obviously, we cannot stop the war. We can demand here to go back to a 12-month military service, and demand a voluntary participation in military conflicts. It is a tactical measure and it does not solve the problem in full, but it is in our line of the interests. However, our main energy should be concentrated on the demand to abolish enlistment by conscription altogether. This is the main question, since without abolishing of conscription, nothing will change in the army. And the burden of the problems with security of our country and in Chechnya would be again put onto boys' shoulders, yesterday's schoolboys. This entire pyramid: excessively huge country, huge government, huge apparatus, all short-circuit on the boy-soldier's shoulders. We must fight this. Boys just 18 years old cannot

carry the whole burden of this problem and pay for it with their lives. Indeed, the value of one's life is not apparent when one is 18 years old. It seems eternal, life, and it is being destroyed!..."

(Nikolaeva, 2000:33-36; emphasis and translation by the author)



Nikolai Kurta, General, Head Office for National Education, Army of the Russian Federation. Extract from presentation at the III International Congress of Soldiers' Mothers, 23 March 2002, Moscow.

"Good afternoon, dear comrades, dear women, beautiful and incredible! I am grateful for being invited to your Congress. The problems you are raising here are indeed urgent, they exist, and there is no way we can run from them.

"First, what I would like to say concerns the participants of this Congress, the audience here. Woman has always inspired man in beauty, bravery, self-sacrifice, she always taught man: love the motherland, love Mother Russia, with all your strength, spirit and energy. And thank you for that. I remember days when my head was not as grey-haired as it is today. I was on leave from a military college in Leningrad, on my way to Rostov district, Kamensk-Shakhtinsky town. In Kazan station, when we stopped for 20 minutes, I saw a beautiful young woman. I have never seen her again, though there is a poem left from that moment:

*Oh, if your eyes told me
Where to go to find you...
I see you here for the first time
It pains to know: to lose you without meeting.*

"Yes, woman always calls us, men, towards the sublime and the creative. Certainly, comrades, when coming here, I hoped to be met with understanding, companionship, working out solutions and recommendations for our collaboration, that we all strive towards. I started working in the Head Office a year ago. Before that I was there, where our main bolt is swirling, our subject here – the soldier. The soldier is really burdened today twice over, he suffers a lot. Before going to the army, he is under stress, if he was not properly fed and educated at home. And we see it too often. It burdens him even more. And the discussion of the army today, despite many negative comments, cannot be separated from society as a whole. Army is a slice, a block of society. And what kind of society you

give us, we have to work with it. We hear these numbers that always shock me, these 5, 20, 30% (of the sick children). We forbid the mentioning of these numbers in the army. What can we do? We have to work with such people as the state gives us. And we cannot avoid problems that the young man has had over 18 years. I do not believe the army can re-educate him in two years. Yes, we can frame him in certain boundaries, we can give him clear tasks, supervise; however, we cannot 'cheat' his nature.

"It does not bother me that the army is heavily criticised at this Congress. Reforms are on going, it will happen, its time has come. You participate in this process, comrades, it is your achievement and help too, but everything needs to be done within the legal framework. We act according to the legal field. Military forces cannot work otherwise. The laws that exist are acted out in practice and if changes in the army are necessary, they need to be first enacted in the law. The person in military uniform and his actions become illegal and criminal without proper legal foundation. That is why it is necessary and possible to reinforce all suggestions, it is necessary to propose and create for it proper conditions.

"We see here representatives from various foundations. And I want to hear, how much any of these foundations have supported, financially, at least one of the committees of soldiers' mothers.

"And how wonderful the committees of soldiers' mothers work with their conscripts or with those who are conscripted from their region! I remember gladly Taiganat Baisultanova from Dagestan. Some of you smile – yes, she is an unusual person – she comes and knocks on your door, insistently; she gathers local people, she talks to them about law...I know other committees, like from Bryansk. I can name many, I served in the western part of Russia. I have always met them with a certain kind of pleasure. After meetings with our soldiers' mothers each time I would sit down and think over the issues: how to make it happen, how this could work, etc. And indeed, many of the tips have worked and helped a lot. And this kind of collaboration is good, otherwise nothing effective would come out of discussion. I am convinced that any discussion carries a useful seed, and this seed would definitely germinate on our Russian soil. As the great Russian poet said:

*Mind cannot comprehend Russia
Common measure does not apply
She has a special posture
Only faith in her possible.*

"You understand that I, a military man, have a faith in Russia. In the fact that she will bloom, be a strong, solid, rich, talented and intelligent Russia. We cannot avoid it, it is our destiny.

"Another thing I want to say, comrades. There are unacceptable words and expressions, especially in public. When a person comes to a microphone to say that our chief commander, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, President, should be taken out, I cannot comprehend that. He was elected by all people. He has to be respected, hence why such almost insulting words? Besides, you were asking here if he understands mothers. Russia is reforming, and with any process things cannot go all smoothly, that no one is hurt or touched. Life does not work this way.

"Now our common pain is the Northern Caucasus. The President of the Russian Federation directed the Defence Minister to create (on 10 April 2002) a department of social protection of the military personnel and their families, under the Head Office of National Education, Russian Army. All help to those who are affected in the Northern Caucasus would go through this office: financial and other help. All-Russia's National Military Fund will provide financing. Those who were injured from December 1994 onwards, and the families of the dead, would be assisted. Issues with accommodation, prostheses, medical assistance would be dealt with. This department is now under construction, and probably, chance will make me the head of it. Most probably, it will be me, yes. That is why I am asking the committees of soldiers' mothers: ask families who have lost their father or son, who do not have an apartment, the disabled in need of a prosthesis, of treatment, to call us. If they have correct papers to support their claims, we will write a contract and pay for everything, we will help them financially. My phone is 293-8985. This department is formed not for other offices, but to interact directly with the All-Russia's National Military Fund, to help people in concrete ways, materially and financially. Thank you for your attention". (Kurta, 2002:36-38, translation by author).

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