

Opposition to the War in Chechnya: Antimilitarist Organizing in Russia

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Patriotism, or the devoted love of one's country, is a phenomenon that can be used in the service of the state. Often, during wartime, the militarized aspect of patriotism is stressed. The state puts out a message calling for unanimity among the population, preferably unanimity in support of state policy and may try to restrict media criticism of state policies. This has been the case during the second phase of Russia's war in Chechnya, which started in 1999), for instance, when Russian journalists have been forbidden to talk to representatives of Chechnya's rebels, who the Russian government deems "bandits" and "terrorists." For journalists to do so would be in violation of a Russian law on combating terrorism. Such censorship bolsters the hegemony of the patriotic rhetoric that the state is seeking to uphold.

Popular protest against the war in Chechnya has been scarce in Russia. The first phase of the war (1994–1996) was, however, evidently more unpopular than the second. Public protests against the war took place rarely in 1995–1996 and without mass participation. However such protest has been more rare since the renewal of the war in late 1999. The state's present determination to control information about Chechnya can be seen in the selective prosecution of certain "oligarchs," including Vladimir Gusinsky, whose television station, NTV, was perhaps the most critical of the war in Chechnya. Such actions serve to reduce popular knowledge about the war. Simultaneously, the state leadership made much of the fatal apartment bombings that took place in 1999 in Russia. These bombings were initially blamed on Chechens, although none of the suspects later accused of the crimes turned out to be ethnic Chechens. Still, these bombings provided a political opportunity to change public consciousness about the purported danger presented by Chechens. As of mid-March 2000, 73 percent of the population of Russia polled supported the renewed war in Chechnya, although support for the war has fallen since that time.

Despite current and dramatic problems in the Russian army, ranging from suicides to the deadly harassment of new recruits, low pay, and almost medieval living conditions, the army remains in the public mind a national symbol that pulls people together. According to surveys by VTsIOM, the army is still the most trusted of Russia's institutions; between 1993 and 2000, people expressed slightly more confidence overall in the army than in other institutions,

including the Church. The present war over Chechnya provides a chance for the state to recapture faith in the army, pull the nation together around its one remaining widely admired symbol, and beef up popular patriotic sentiments and support for state leadership.

Patriotism can thereby serve the goals of the state. Yet patriotism can also serve a critical function as part of the dialog that should be present in a liberal democracy. Senator William Fulbright put it well when he said, "To criticize one's country is to do it a service...Criticism, in short, is more than a right; it is an act of patriotism—a higher form of patriotism, I believe, than the familiar rituals and national adulation." This is the alternative type of patriotism currently being promoted by several antimilitarist groups in Russia today. These include various committees of soldiers' mothers (CSM), and the Anti-Militarist Radical Association (ARA). Through a variety of nonviolent and transparent methods, these groups question the army, the one institution that has been a continuous locus of patriotism in Russia. They argue that young men should refuse to serve in unjust, undeclared wars like the one being prosecuted in Chechnya. They believe that Russia's best interests can be served differently, namely, through the establishment of a liberal democracy, state transparency, and rule of law.

The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers and Alternatives to a Militarized Patriotism

The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers was founded in 1989 and reregistered in 1999 as the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers. It has approximately 300 branches in Russia, and more than 2,500 activists. The Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg operates independently of the CSM network, but shares many of the same goals. During peacetime, the CSM's main activities include tracking deaths and injuries from hazing within the armed forces, counseling draft-age men and their parents about their rights regarding conscription and its avoidance, and lobbying for alternative service. They conduct a total of about 9,000 consultations a year for draftees (both in the army and those trying to avoid service). During war, they keep track (as best they can) of casualties, and even post the names of dead soldiers on the Internet, because it is so difficult for families to extract information from the military. They also see their purpose as spreading accurate information about the war and keeping the public informed. To that end, they hold demonstrations, lobby, write open letters, and hold dramatic events that draw international attention, such as the mothers' trips to Chechnya during the first phase of the war, when groups of mothers traveled to Grozny to recover their sons from prisoner of war camps. On the eve of the Russian presidential elections in March 2000, the CSM held a press conference, at which they called upon Russians to vote against Putin, who was the clear favorite, arguing that his presidency would mean a continuation of the war in Chechnya. One of the posters at the conference put it this way: "If you are voting for war, put money aside for your children's funeral." These sorts of actions help to introduce an alternative voice that undermines the state's version of militarized patriotism.

Such actions have not gone without response from Russia's state leaders. Military officials and others have accused the CSM of being antipatriotic. Such accusations often label the CSM activists as traitors in the pay of foreign organizations and governments. The women working for the Nizhnii Novgorod regional branch of the CSM discovered that when they received foreign grants, they were labeled "CIA agents" and "agents of NATO," and local officials accused the

CSM of trying to “ruin the army,” whereas they saw themselves as imposing order and rule of law on it. Activists at other branches of the CSM have reported similar experiences.

The CSM’s critique of the Russian state’s policy goes well beyond an assertion of their right, as mothers, to protect their children. What they present in their literature and in public statements amounts to a redefinition of patriotism, a challenge to the way that the Russian state has “defended” the country. What the CSM proposes as an alternative is a state that would defend the country by applying liberal-democratic principles.

One of the main planks in the CSM platform to that end, particularly with regard to Chechnya, is that the war being prosecuted there is, in fact, illegal and that it undermines democracy in Russia. The current “party of power,” Unity, directly opposes this position. Indeed, during the campaign for the December 1999 Duma elections, Unity’s leader, Sergei Shoigu, called critics of the war traitors.

By counterpoising democracy to the use of the army in Chechnya, the CSM is suggesting a redefinition of patriotism, an alternative way to demonstrate devotion to and defense of one’s country, namely by following rule of law and upholding human rights. The CSM in general prides itself on the importance of obedience to the law—by both the army and the civilian state. When addressing draft boards, for example, they make their demands “strictly on the basis of the law” and focus on increasing the legal knowledge of their clientele, in order to enable them to defend their rights according to the law.

In interviews with soldiers’ mothers groups about politics in Russia, activists from St. Petersburg and Orel both stressed to me the importance of increasing “openness” and honesty between the state and the population.

The prosecution of the war in Chechnya, with frequent reprisals against the civilian population, strike the soldiers’ mothers as clear violations of human rights that must be stopped, in part through increased state honesty and freedom of information. Such violations include the massacre of civilians in Samashki in 1995, and a variety of crimes committed by Russian armed forces in villages near Grozny in July 2001. The latter ranged from widespread looting and the destruction of civilian buildings, to abuses of civilians during interrogations (through the use of electric shocks, for example). The CSM argues that such acts are incompatible with democracy.

A democratic Russia, by contrast, would focus on the rule of law, the freedom of information, and on the nonviolent defense of human rights. Because the army and state do not observe these rules, the CSM has repeatedly said that no young man should serve, and indeed, their activities may be having an effect. Approximately 5,000 soldiers are now deserting each year, and the numbers are growing. The CSM’s criticisms of the war in Chechnya and calls to evade military service clearly undermine the Russian state’s patriotic symbolic focal point. The ARA also supports these goals and also lobbies for the passage of a law on alternative service that would fulfill the constitution’s promise in that regard.

In short, the CSM and ARA serve to remind the population that alternatives exist: alternative service, alternative frameworks, alternatives to the unquestioning militarized patriotism promoted by the state. While challenging the state’s preferred discourse about patriotism, the CSM sets up alternative frames around which to mobilize the population: rather than patriotic obedience, one overall frame is democracy, backed by a rule of law, freedom of information, and

the observation of human rights. The second frame, particularly with respect to the war in Chechnya, is the preservation of life using peaceful means.

Conclusion

In a nation-state where ethnic and territorial borders largely coincide, patriotism may easily have an exclusivist-nationalist component, and be used to serve the goals of politicians hoping to mobilize the population for destructive goals. In a multinational state like Russia, the militaristic patriotism that Yeltsin's and Putin's administrations promote can also carry that risk. The Russian state leadership's use of a militaristic patriotism as a means to generate popular support risks unleashing ethnic chauvinism, and the military domination of civilian institutions. Such phenomena cast doubt on the prospects for Russia's state-building process to proceed along liberal-democratic lines.

Nongovernmental organizations, such as Russia's varied committees of soldiers' mothers, however, have devised an alternative vision of patriotism, relying on rule of law and the observance of civil rights, and thereby hold out a slim hope for reframing Russian patriotism and building a peaceful democracy.

What are the implications of this situation for U.S. policy? First of all, any blunting of the criticism of Russian army human rights violations in Chechnya by the current U.S. government, in order to curry favor with the Russian government, will not be doing Russian democracy a favor in the long run. Turning a blind eye to human rights violations, even if couched in terms of fighting international terrorism, will bolster the power of militarists in the Russian state, with implications for Russia's domestic and foreign policy. Second, and just as importantly, the U.S. government can respond to the attacks of September 11 by setting an example of how a liberal democracy could handle extremely difficult and dangerous threats to the peace and safety of its population without losing sight of the central importance of civil liberties. Policies that run roughshod over the rights of citizens and immigrants, such as the use of military tribunals, and those that restrict information from the public, such as the censorship of television coverage of the war, send the wrong message to other states that the U.S. government is hoping to encourage to move further down the road to entrenched democracy. Retreating from democratic practices provides a flimsy platform from which to promote them.