

CRITICISM AND COMPLAINT IN SOLDIERS' NARRATIVES OF THE CHECHEN WARS

by

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Criticism and Complaint in Soldiers' Narratives of the Chechen Wars

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The ideological vacuum left by the absence of a strong state in the post-Soviet structure as well as pre-existing poor conditions in the Russian Army led to significant losses in men, morale, and public trust during the first and second Chechen Wars. The Russian soldiers who fought in these wars were faced with the lack of a framework with which to interpret their service and participation in military action that often perpetuated human rights abuses. The meaninglessness of the conflicts was compounded by the absence of public support for veterans as they returned home. This led to a need to define both their identities as soldiers as well as justify their own actions. I will examine how two veterans, Arkady Babchenko and Aleksandr Karasev, interpreted and defined their experiences in their published narratives about the war, focusing on their own victimhood and ignoring suffering experienced by Chechens, both civilians and soldiers. Using their works, *Война (War)* and *Чеченские рассказы (Chechen Stories)*, respectively, I compare research on veterans from the American wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan as well as the South African Border Wars, drawing similarities with how combatants formed narratives focused on identities of suffering rather than participation.

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Background

When Russian President Boris Yeltsin began his military operation in Chechnya in 1994, he had little notion of the struggles that awaited him. Through the failures that would follow, it became apparent how out of touch the high command was regarding the battle readiness and overall welfare of the Russian military (Oushakine 144). In his article, “Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonization of the Chechens before and since 9/11,” John Russell describes the long history of ethnic tension leading to the eruption of the wars. The conflict officially began as an effort to bring the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria back under Russian control after former Soviet general Dzhokar Dudayev, having gained popularity and power after the fall of the USSR, declared independence from the Russian Federation. This beginning had a much older past, beginning with the Caucasian War in the early 19th century and continuing with Russia’s deportation of Chechens in 1864 and again in 1944 by Stalin. These events and conflicts had already cultivated an attitude of animosity and distrust of the government before the start of the First Chechen War. Although there was a brief pause in the fighting after the signing of a peace treaty in November, 1996, the Second Chechen War began after the Chechen incursion into Dagestan in May 1999 (Russell).

Despite grossly outnumbering the Chechen fighters, Russian forces were horribly unprepared for the resistance that met them. Russian leaders quickly realized that the military, plagued by worn, outdated equipment, lacking leadership, and staggeringly low morale, was in poor fighting condition (Oushakine 144). Few soldiers understood why they were being sent into war at all, and the losses that followed only further undermined support for the war amongst both civilian and military populations (Felgenhauer). Public support increased at the start of the second war after apartment bombings in Moscow, killing almost 300, were blamed on Chechen

fighters (Russell). However, problems within the structure of the military both on and off the battlefield continued to grow.

Many commanders resorted to a strategy consisting largely of “throwing an endless stream of expendable recruits before enemy fire” (Eichler 213). In the First Chechen War, masses of untrained conscripts were sent to Grozny, resulting in significant casualties (Herspring 99). Before the Second Chechen War, units were given a month to prepare their troops, a task already beset with the difficulties of hazing and poor morale amongst the men (Herspring 41). The reliance on conscription soldiers caused significant problems as well. They were often poorly trained, inept, and unable to properly care for or use the equipment provided them (Felgenhauer). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, conscription became even less popular, with the number of draft evaders and deserters increasing. Between 1990 and 2005, an average of 30,000 of those drafted failed to answer, and an average of 5,000 soldiers deserted every year (Eichler 59). Theft and crime were prevalent issues, and it was noted that “No one has ever been able to put a figure on the overall scale of theft in the Russian armed forces. Rations [were] sold while soldiers [went] hungry. Arms and ammunition disappear[ed]...Fuel, spare parts, and vehicles [could] be bought” (Herspring 180). The widespread corruption and misappropriation of military funds, equipment, and labor had devastating effects on the performance of the army both strategically and administratively.

Although there have recently been massive overhauls in the conscription program, they came too late to help any of the young men who were forced to serve in the Chechen wars (Liaropoulos). Serious issues within the Russian military in the 1990s and early 2000s led to a lack of public trust and support in addition to ineffective and prolonged warfare. Human-rights abuses were rampant not only in the Russian army’s treatment of Chechen enemies and civilians,

but within the military as well, with hazing, drunkenness, and corruption infiltrating every aspect of life (Sieca-Kozlowski). Military hazing has even earned a specific name, coined as *dedovshchina* from *ded*, the nickname of soldiers who have served all but six months of the two-year conscription (Karasev “Ob avtore”). *Dedovshchina* is a systematic and brutal form of hazing which was seen to be caused by a four-tiered hierarchy based on a two-year service and biannual drafts. Less experienced soldiers are forced to do the bidding of the conscripts who have served longer and are often subject to beatings. Although the service commitment was decreased to twelve months to end this practice, the incidents of abuse were on an upward trend in the late 2000’s (“2010 Human Rights Report: Russia”).

Introduction

Non-fiction narratives of common soldiers written in the context of these wars are astonishingly few. If published at all, their popularity is limited in comparison with stories about World War II that dominate attention from the reading audience. Under Putin, “the Great Patriotic War is the fundamental narrative on which the identity of the new Russia is increasingly being grounded” (Casula 219). The wars in Chechnya, as well as those who took part in them, have remained largely unnoticed. In the West, one memoir achieved greater recognition and a somewhat more receptive audience: *One Soldier’s War in Chechnya* by Arkady Babchenko. It was published in full for the first time in the United Kingdom in 2007. The Russian version did not follow until 2015, when it was released under the title *Voina (War)*. Before the Russian release of Babchenko’s book, Aleksandr Karasev’s *Chechenskie rasskazy (Chechen Stories)* was published in 2008 by Literaturnaya Rossiya, receiving several literary awards, but both authors had begun publishing their stories in various journals before releasing the completed compilations. Although similar accounts of the experience of Russian veterans of the Chechen

wars exist on internet forums and archives, I will specifically focus on *Voina* and *Chechenskie rasskazy* due to the wide readership they gained through publication. Memoirs published in online journals and on forums disclose similar experiences that run counter to the official government line concerning the state of the military and the wars, but due to less visibility and popularity, have not had as significant of an impact. Such accounts, while allowing their authors to express their experiences, do not have an expectation of public acknowledgement, and are, therefore, less politically involved.

Previous research of memoirs by Russian soldiers who served during the Chechen wars by Anna Brodsky in her article “Chechen War Memoirs and Nationalist Identity in Russia” focuses largely on the identities of the Russian soldiers based on or in opposition to ethnic and religious views of Chechen combatants. She examines this aspect based on the accounts of Gennadii Troshev, a general who wrote *Moia Voina (My War)*, and Vyacheslav Mironov, a captain who wrote *Ya byl na etoi voine (I Was in That War)*, both of which describe their experience during the Chechen conflicts. Brodsky’s argument is valid in the context of these two memoirs, but accounts of soldiers who have served in the lowest ranks as conscripts are lacking in her research. Using primarily the two narratives of professional officers, she makes the broad claim that “[i]n works on Chechya, Russian soldiers emerge as personally invested in the war and deeply committed to the idea that their enemies are ‘scum’ who ought to be wiped out” (298).

While both Babchenko and Karasev continued in their military careers for several years, they began as conscripts. The experiences of front-lines in Chechnya by the soldiers as recorded in their books do not focus on the ethnic conflict between Russians and Chechens, but center around everyday military life of the average soldier, revealing the decayed state of the structure,

discipline and morale of Russian forces. A nationalistic and ethnic ideology based in opposition to the Chechens is absent. Instead, the stories describe the struggle of soldiers faced with a bureaucratic system that uses them to meet its own corrupt ends and a society that forgets about them during the war and barely notices their return. Rather than suggesting, as Brodsky does, that the Russian soldier based his fight against the Chechens in his ethnic pride and nationalistic ideology, I will discuss how the depictions of the wars by Karasev and Babchenko show a bitterness and hatred, not toward the declared enemy, but toward their own government (298). However, the publication of their books was not only a protest against the current establishment, but a chance to validate their own actions as well as those of fellow soldiers during the wars. Ignoring the atrocities committed against Chechens by Russian soldiers, their stories create an identity of victimhood. In Serguei Oushakine's book *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia*, he "[examines] how people experienced the state's withdrawal from their lives by using interviews with veterans of Chechen wars" (131). He argues that the decrease of state control in the post-Soviet structure made null the previous conceptions of identity citizens had sought. This resulted in a compulsion to "redefine and renegotiate their self-perception" (132). His research, based on interviews with veterans, attempts to determine how the restructuring of their identities took place. Applying this framework, I discuss how the same phenomenon is revealed in the written and published accounts of veterans.

In their narratives, both Babchenko and Karasev used the experiences of low-ranking soldiers who served in the Chechen Wars as a public platform from which to protest and criticize the government or military system while simultaneously justifying their personal actions. The form and presentation of their stories as memoirs and fundamentally truthful was essential to their struggle for validation and recognition from society and their reading public. This

legitimized their complaints about the low morale and quality of the Russian Army that led to significant losses and set-backs during the wars. They did not write, as Samuel Hynes suggests of military memoirs in *A Soldiers' Tale*, because they felt “a need to say, like the ubiquitous Kilroy, ‘I was there’.” Nor did they write as an expression of their animosity toward and superiority to their Chechen enemies, as put forth by Anna Brodsky. The criticism of the military and government served a two-fold purpose: it allowed the authors to bring legitimate problems within these structures to light as well as to highlight their personal suffering, minimizing their role as perpetrators of the wars.

Arkady Babchenko, author of *Voyna*, describes in his biography how he was drafted as a conscript at 18 in 1995 to fight in the First Chechen War for two years. After returning to finish a degree in international law, he then entered military service again as the Second Chechen War began, but this time as a contracted soldier (*kontraktnik*). After he was demobilized, he began a career as a journalist and war correspondent, working for various news and media outlets such as NTV, RTR, TV Tsentr, and Novaya Gazeta, covering the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. He was awarded several prizes in journalism and literature both in Russia and abroad (Kozlova, Babchenko “Bio”). He gradually became an outspoken critic of the Russian government and continues unleashing caustic criticisms and condemnations of the current administration. In 2012, he was charged with inciting disturbances and unrest in the masses following a post he made on his blog, encouraging protest for free and fair elections (“Na zhurnalista Babchenko”). In the most recent development, Babchenko fled to the Czech Republic this year in February to avoid a criminal conviction and prison sentence (“Net cheloveka”). This was a result of public backlash after Babchenko posted on Facebook that he felt no pity or sympathy in regards to the crash of a Tu-154 aircraft carrying members of a

military performing ensemble set to perform in Syria. He saw the group as furthering the propaganda of the Russian government, but his comments resulted in a petition to deprive him of his citizenship (Nikitina, Solodkov).

The author of *Chechenskie rasskazy*, Aleksandr Karasev, served as a conscript 1989-1991 before earning degrees in history and law and completing the military course at the Kuban State University. Although he had aspirations to become a writer as a student, his attempts at a novel at that time were ultimately unsuccessful (Boiko). He worked in various other jobs before continuing with his military career as a lieutenant in Chechnya from 2000 to 2002 during the second war. According to Karasev, he began making notes about his life and service in the army as well as experimenting with his literary style again after the diary of a fellow soldier who was killed in the war fell into his hands (Kamneva). The war finally provided a setting cohesive to his original goal of writing a novel. The result was a series of short stories—largely his own memoirs as well as the stories of other low-ranking officers and conscripts who served in Chechnya. He began publishing the stories in literary journals, starting in 2003, and eventually released them as an independent collection in 2008, earning him several literary recognitions including the Bunin Prize the same year (Karasev, “Ob avtore”).

Babchenko, the conscript/*kontraktnik*, wrote in compulsion as a means of making sense of his military service, while bringing light to a significant societal and political problem. Karasev, the lieutenant, used the army as “a background, not the subject” for his writing (армия часто даёт мне фон, а не тему) (Senchin). He reconfigures war through the literary lens of an author first and foremost rather than describing the war in exactitude as a soldier and participant. Writing not only from his experience, but that of other soldiers, Karasev’s stories flow together without clear distinction or attribution to a specific person, merging or blurring identities. This

reflects his primary focus on literary development and style. While Babchenko also utilizes the technique of combining multiple people into one character, his book is strictly a memoir, recording only his personal experience. The stories Karasev and Babchenko relate could easily be placed out of chronological order with no noticeable difference to the reader. As Hynes points out regarding the Vietnam War, the main storyline is not the main historical events and battles, but the everyday life of the common soldier. In this form, accounts take on a disjointed, discombobulated aspect: “These pieces of a fragmented war are separated from each other, linked only by a common ugliness and violence” (206).

The Invisible Chechen

A dominating characteristic of both accounts is the lack of Chechens in them. They do not appear as victims, friends, or even enemies, but as a superfluous part of the background. Similar to Brodsky’s suggestion, this reveals an ethnocentrism, but rather than featuring Chechens as “scum” and scourge, they are barely shown in the stories at all (298). As Oushakine notes, “the war has not created a strong version of any collectivity able to mobilize the Russians against the Muslim Chechens...[it] has not precipitated an immediate surge of Russian nationalism, nor has it led to Russian national self-consciousness” (138). In both works I examine, this is illustrated by the absence of ideology concerning either Russian superiority or a desire to eliminate the Chechens as the enemy. When portrayed in either account, the Chechens are typically civilians, suffering as the soldiers do from the effects of the war. Particularly in the story of the conscript/*kontraktnik*, Babchenko, this is described as caused by the government rather than the soldiers themselves. Karasev and Babchenko rarely write about Chechens as legitimate threats and combatants. The dialogue of their stories is internal to the Russian military and avoids in-depth examination regarding views of or opinions about Chechen fighters.

In *Chechenskie rasskazy*, the stories presented by the lieutenant, Karasev, Chechens are described purely strategically, in terms of how they are likely to attack or what potential threat they present militarily. This is discussed without any emotion, from a point of a fighting advantage, not ethnic enmity. More often, Chechens are absent completely. In one passage, Karasev describes an evening firefight he participates in more like a firework display than combat. With no mention of an enemy or even target, he writes about an “astounding spectacle” as “two illuminating rockets, green and red” take off from their position. “Зрелище было потрясающим. С РОПа взметнулись две осветительные ракеты – зелёная и красная... Все уже стреляли из автоматов, и я тоже в упоении разряжал магазин в чёрные вершины (Everyone was already shooting from their automatics and in ecstasy, I too unloaded a magazine into the black peaks).” In this view, combat is victimless and Chechens are lacking completely. Karasev distances himself from being the agent in the war, freeing himself of any responsibility. He portrays himself as being in a violent, extreme environment as an observer, rather than a participant and contributor.

The dangers a soldier on the front lines faces are rarely described as coming from the Chechen fighters, but are instead found within the environment or the Russian army itself. In one of Karasev’s stories, a soldier talks about the constant peril experienced in the army, the officially declared enemy unmentioned: “Всё потенциально враждебно: сослуживцы, командиры, техника, пища, холодный воздух и жара (Everything was potentially hostile: fellow soldiers, commanders, the equipment, the food, the cold air, and the heat).” As a response, animosity and retaliation occur within the ranks, as demonstrated by one lieutenant daydreaming about Chechens downing a helicopter with his commander inside. In another story, a conscript repeatedly aims his sights at the silhouette of a lieutenant who turns a blind eye to *dedovshchina*

in his unit. The focus of the Chechen Wars here is placed almost solely on issues within the military. This excludes Chechens from the events almost entirely, ignoring the suffering they experienced.

The Chechens' motivation for fighting is also afforded no discussion in either of the books. As characters, they are given as much depth as any other part of the environment, no more than the mountains or forests. In *Chechenskie rasskazy*, one commander discusses how "Chechens could attack from any side (чехи могли наступать с какой угодно стороны)," as though they were as unpredictable and indifferent as a natural disaster. In a second passage, they are encountered in a non-combat setting. They are shown as somber, practically silent, "staring at the Russians with impudent eyes, their lips scornfully spitting (неулыбчивы и немногословны... смотрят на русских наглыми глазами, их губы презрительно сплёвывают)." Here, Chechens have no individuation or characterization, positive or negative. In an effort to raise vigilance and effort on the part of his men, Karasev mentions "the insidious enemy (коварного врага)" but makes no mention of a personal vendetta against them as an ethnicity as Brodsky claims was central to the Russian soldiers in the war. In her article, she uses the example of Mironov, the captain, to make broad statements concerning all Russians who participated in the wars: "[c]omradeship and vengeance are powerful tools and serve to justify atrocities committed by Russians in Chechnya" (Brodsky 304). Taken in the context of the texts she chose to use, this is an accurate assessment. Both Mironov, who came from a military family and received his education from a military academy, and Troshev, a military careerist, viewed the war in a larger, ideological context. Therefore, their experience differs from that of low-ranking soldiers, specifically conscripts, serving on the front lines during the wars. Their positions and identities were inherently more linked with the military, and were therefore more

committed to maintaining internal cohesion of the system, despite negative or pessimistic views of the government itself.

In the memoirs of Babchenko, the conscript/*kontraktnik*, the few mentions of Chechens are even treated with sympathy. While he avoids talking about the human rights violations and war crimes committed by the Russian side, he views Chechens as victims of the regime like the soldiers themselves. He distances himself from any agency or guilt, saying that “the Motherland forces to kill people—our own people, who speak Russian (Родина заставляет убивать людей — своих людей, которые говорят по-русски).” In another scene, a fellow soldier ponders the legitimacy of the military action there, asking if Chechens are citizens of Russia or enemies: “Чеченцы, они граждане России или враги России? Если они враги — то их надо попросту всех убить и не церемониться. А если они граждане — то как же с ними воевать? (If they are enemies, then they should all be killed without ceremony. But if they are citizens, then how can we be at war with them?).” Babchenko answers later in the book, saying “we didn’t fight with Chechens. We fought against lies and venality, for good and justice (Мы воевали не с «чехами». Мы дрались против лжи и продажности, за добро и справедливость).” Here, he does more than deny violence that the Russian soldiers carried out; he claims a nobility and righteousness of their actions. He generalizes all conscripts, awarding them a moral superiority as well as brushing aside any of the potential wrongdoing they committed. This passage also contradicts the numerous accounts of violence he suffered at the hands of other conscripts, refuting their place as his enemies as well as Chechens.

In a later interview with the BBC, Babchenko again emphasizes his lack of hostility toward the Chechens: “Я чеченцев врагами не считаю и не считал. Мои враги здесь были, в Москве (I didn’t consider the Chechens enemies and don’t now. My enemies were here, in

Moscow)” (Kharchenko). However, recognition of the injustice they suffered, not only during the wars, but historically as well, is completely omitted in *Voina*. By keeping the focus on the government as the enemy, the discussion of the Chechen as a victim of violence committed by Russians is circumvented, preventing the admittance of any guilt on the part of the soldiers like Babchenko. As in *Chechenskie rasskazy*, Chechens are merely a second thought and an aspect of the location and war. Instead of including them in the cry for justice to be done as part of Babchenko’s protest, they are barely afforded a second thought.

As with Karasev, Babchenko describes the Chechen combatants as brutal, but in those instances, they are again treated as just another dangerous aspect of life there, no more threatening than the lack of food or drinkable water. As one reviewer of *Voina* describes: “Описание жестокости чеченцев воспринимается примерно так же как описание природного катаклизма, но оно не возмущает, оно не вызывает страха или гнева (The description of the cruelty of the Chechens is roughly perceived just like a description of a natural cataclysm, but it doesn’t rouse indignation, it doesn’t rouse fear or anger)” (Volodarskii). In comparison with the emotionally-charged outbursts concerning fellow soldiers who beat him or the Russian government and society, the Chechens are little more than a side note of his experience there. Babchenko and Karasev perpetuate an ethnocentrism in their works, but rather than the one Brodsky describes as ethnic hatred, it operates by leaving out the story of the Chechens, recalling only the Russian side.

The problem of excluding the Chechens from the Russians’ memories of the war is similar to Viet Thanh Nyugen’s discussion about the narratives that emerged concerning the Vietnam War in his article “Just Memory: War and the Ethics of Remembrance”:

The ethics of recalling one's own, no matter which side exercises it, is the dominant kind of ethical memory. This type of ethics is deeply political, but in self-denial about its politics, preferring to see its mode of recalling one's own as natural.

Neither Karasev nor Babchenko discuss personal animosity toward the Chechens or a desire for revenge as found in the memoirs of Mirinov. But the blind focus on only the Russian side of the war, leaving out the effects on the enemy or even civilians they regularly interacted with, reveals an ethnocentrism in both accounts. This selective view of the war ignores the very people on whose land the battles were fought. Nyugen responds to the problem of ethnocentrism in memory by suggesting the need for "the awareness of forgetting," a realization of the imperfection and exclusion inherent in the recollection of one's own side. Though *Voyna* and *Chechenskie rasskazy* challenged the official narrative of a Russian soldier's experience of the wars, they furthered the ethnic division between Russians and Chechens by rendering the latter practically invisible and ignored the loss of Chechen lives which likely exceeded 100,000 (Cornell).

The Protest Against Authority

In the early to mid-2000s "the military was widely known as one of Russia's most corrupt institutions, with senior officers accumulating large amounts of money by redirecting procurement and construction funding and using conscript labor for personal needs" (Gorenburg). Veterans who suffered during the war found little relief returning home, realizing that the public was less concerned with them than healthcare, the economy, and other social issues, and they "found themselves isolated and abandoned and faced with the failure of the state to ensure the payment of combat pensions and indemnities" (Gerber, Sieca-Kozlowski). Both Babchenko and Karasev directly mention and describe this rampant corruption in addition to incompetence, drunkenness, and *dedovshchina*. Their stories are testaments to a broken and

chaotic system and an insight into the massive failures and losses the Russian Army experienced against a supposedly inferior enemy during the Chechen Wars.

Both authors' works are political statements on the degraded state of the establishments in Russia at the time of the conflicts. In Babchenko's memoirs, it emerges as a direct and caustic condemnation of the government. Karasev, the lieutenant, portrays military structure and high command with a subtler scorn. His accounts reflect what Oushakine found in veterans' narratives regarding their traumatic experiences, that "the state was largely missing" (130). Hynes writes that war narratives are "[s]tories, first of all: responses to that primal need we all have to tell and to hear individual experiences, and so to understand our own lives and imagine the lives of others" (16). I argue that as opposition to the official government discourse on the war and army, Karasev and Babchenko did more than relate their personal experience; they challenge the very system they were a part of. "...[N]arratives of trauma are inherently political: when the survivors of trauma attempt to articulate their experience, it is a challenge to the system of myths and understandings in the broader culture" (Doherty). Babchenko's and Karasev's texts undermine the official narrative of the war and reveal the unflattering condition of the Russian military. In their narratives, the true villain is the system that forced its own citizens to partake in monstrous acts or left them to suffer. Additionally, in writing about the war, they represented not only their own experiences, but the experiences of all other soldiers who fought in those wars, a community that has been ignored by the government and society.

Oushakine describes that the veterans of these wars express in their narratives "not the demand for being heard but a desire to be hailed, addressed, and differentiated by the state" (163). This grants them a concrete identity, purpose, and meaning as citizens. Despite the horrors of war, it was the lack of response on the part of the government and society to recognize the

sacrifices of veterans that created the discord in their identities as soldiers and birthed the drive to share their stories. “No influential public mobilization—be it prowar or antiwar—has been triggered in the course of the Chechen war” (Oushakine 150). The accounts of Babchenko and Karasev began with the need to answer the question of what happened upon their return. In the absence of public and political support, they became their own advocates through the publishing of their stories, but this too had limited effectiveness, as Babchenko would later mention in an interview with *The Guardian* that even after the release of his book, there has been “[n]o effect. No response. Society in Russia at the moment is extremely indifferent, totally unconcerned about everything” (Clothier).

This sentiment is echoed by a character in one of Karasev’s stories who finds himself undesired and out of place after returning home. He even longs to go back to the war after finding himself undermined by his own men, scorned by his commander, and unloved by his wife. “Хрен на эту казарму и автопарк, а в Чечне служить можно. Там ты человек (To hell with these barracks and motor pool, but in Chechnya serving is possible. There you’re a human being).” His status as a veteran and officer affords him no respect in his private life or career. Not only did the state fail to hail the soldier as a veteran who served for his country, but his family and coworkers, representations of society, abandoned him as well. His story, as related by Karasev, is an opportunity to voice this rejection and neglect, challenging the systems by which he felt persecuted.

In Karasev’s personal account as a senior lieutenant, he sees his authority and effectivity undermined by both the men under him as well as those above him. While the lack of discipline and adequate training amongst the soldiers under his command plays a subversive role in his leadership and fulfillment of duty, Karasev, with even greater disdain, describes his own self-

serving and pompous superiors. He contrasts his own dedication with the laziness and cowardice of a company commander who is dreading deployment to Chechnya. This commander revels in every extra day spent “cutting up cabbage” far from the dangers of combat, but Karasev himself itches to join the battalion at the front: “Борисенко трусит ехать в батальон и рад каждому лишнему дню в Ведено... Мне неуютно, я хочу побыстрее в батальон (Borisenko is afraid of going to the battalion and glad of every extra day in Vedeno... I'm uncomfortable and want to go as soon as possible).” The superior officers who do end up in Chechnya turn out to be hardly better than this previous commander and show little interest in the fulfillment of their responsibilities or achieving mission effectivity. They unabashedly admit to serving merely for the money, and the captain in Karasev's platoon finds respite and strength to continue only in his morning routine of counting how much he would earn that day. Karasev, once again in contrast with the negative example provided, picks up the slack left by his commander who “slept the whole day, listened to music (on a half-broken “trophy” record-player), carved into wood with a knife, or read my [Bulgakov's famous novel], *Master and Margarita* (Капитан целый день спал, слушал музыку (полуразбитый «трофейный» магнитофон), метал в дерево нож или читал мою *Мастер и Маргариту*).” This “lord of the manor in the village (эдакий барин в деревне)” whom Karasev by no means portrays in a positive light, takes a hands-off approach to his leadership (except in the literal examples of beating up soldiers for any minor offense), allowing Karasev to operate with autonomy and demonstrate his own skill in command: “Корнеев ни во что не вмешивался, а являл на ВОПе устрашающую силу (он легко, за любую провинность, избивал солдат) (Korneev didn't interfere in any way, but showed a frightening might on the platoon post (he would trivially, for any slight, beat up soldiers)).” The efforts made by Karasev and other officers in his stories to improve military discipline and

morale are frequently impaired by superiors who expect them to fulfill unrealistic orders and incompetent conscripts who treat them with apathy.

In the words of another soldier in the final chapter of Karasev's book, he describes the situation in Chechnya as a "circus free-of-charge (цирк бесплатный)." Karasev confirms the accuracy of this view in his observation of troops returning from combat at the front: they are filthy, walking in worn-out tarpaulin boots full of holes, and scratching themselves due to lice infestations. This deplorable scenario turns almost comical as he talks about how the soldiers were ordered to sew white lining into the collars of their uniforms in accordance with dress regulations. He notes the potential danger of attracting a sniper's attention with white cloth, and the absurdity of trying to find white fabric in the trenches. The order shows not only a lack of practicality, but a blatant disregard for the safety of the soldiers. The example illustrates how the top brass used their men, not for mission fulfillment, but to boost their own success and image. The backwards state of command is further exemplified when these soldiers, returning fresh from combat, are selected to be a part of a medal-distribution ceremony for a general but are sent back to the cold and the filth without even a chance to shower after the charade ends. This underlines one of the primary problems of the military during the war: "the army was used as a tool in a political game, used irresponsibly and unjustifiably to carry out a humanitarian and military disaster" (Oushikane 134). This is represented in Babchenko's *Voina* as well. The soldiers, fighting during the Second Chechen War received a care package with the following message from Yeltsin:

Дорогой российский воин, — писал нам президент, — в этот трудный и нелегкий для Родины час... Не уступим и пяди... Дадим отпор. Но не забывай, что твой долг — не только защищать конституционный строй, но и

отдать свой голос на приближающихся выборах. Надеюсь, что в этот день ты сделаешь правильный выбор.¹

Starting with the president and trickling down through high command, the army and soldiers were used for personal gain and career advancement by those above them. This pattern had started even before the wars began. While Dudayev consolidated power and Chechnya's fight for independence was rapidly gaining momentum, the Russian government was distracted by internal politics. "Busy undermining Gorbachev's position, Yeltsin's government in Russia had neither the time nor the resources to deal with the situation in Chechnya" (Oushakine 142). This also resulted in a lack of public trust which undermined support not only for politicians, but for members of the armed forces as well. By highlighting these problems in their texts, Karasev and Babchenko show that they are not participants in the corruption, but victims of it.

In the story "Warrior" (Воин) in *Chechenskie rasskazy*, the commander of the regiment orders a helicopter pad built, despite a lack of space and the impracticality of flying rather than driving. His arrival to view the supposedly completed task highlights the criminal view of the high command. Karasev describes him as "resembling the head of a mafia gang from Sicily (подобно главе мафиозной группировки из Сицилии)." The officers clamber out of the car, slightly drunk, and the commander struts about, shouting absurd orders, the reek of alcohol on every breath. The second lieutenant, to whom the task had been given, mockingly acts with exaggerated military discipline and zeal, apparent to all except the commander himself.

The whole episode is rife with examples of the inefficiency and disorganization, as well as blatant disrespect and contempt for the commanding officers, who are shown to be pompous

¹ Dear Russian warrior – our president wrote – in this difficult and trying hour for Russia... We will not yield by a single inch... We will repulse. But do not forget that your duty is not only to defend the constitutional order but also to lend your voice in the upcoming election. I hope, that on that day you make the correct choice.

and inept in basic military strategy. The comparison with the mafia shows the distrust with which the soldiers relate to their own commander, viewing him as a thug and criminal. There is no common effort towards mission completion and no purpose to the work they do. Their work is meaningless, used as means for out-of-touch and self-serving generals and politicians to impress the next superior in their chain of command. Positive leadership, if existing at all, does not extend beyond those on the front lines, serving alongside common soldiers. Whether the higher positions corrupt those who serve in them or only cretins and morons aspire to those ranks, the lack of any positive example is a striking if indirect commentary on the status of the military forces and the leadership within. In this view, Karasev and the other low-ranking soldiers he writes about were set up for failure regardless of their own personal efforts. It directs the blame of the war upward to the superior officers who were self-serving and unconcerned with the men risking their lives at the front.

In the final chapter of Karasev's book that follows the account of a conscript, the descriptions of military life develop an even darker, more cynical tone:

Армия – порождение и отражение мира гражданского. Но отражение в кривом зеркале. Отражение искажает и преувеличивает, выворачивает наизнанку и превращает в пошлость привычные для человека представления о том, что хорошо, а что плохо, о мере дозволенности, культуре, морали и чести, о дружбе и о войне.²

Related by Karasev, the conscript, Naumov, discusses the problems of corruption he witnessed in his first days of service with a commander who would regularly come into the barracks drunk after a retreat and give the sergeants under his command money taken from the already pitiful

² The army is an outcome and a reflection of the civilian world. But a reflection in a warped mirror. The reflection distorts and exaggerates, flips inside out and makes everything that a person is accustomed to, in presentation of good, bad, about measures of what is permissible, culture, morals and honor, about friendship, and about war, into a banality.

pay of the conscripts. Naumov nearly reaches a breaking point under the command of a lieutenant who chooses to turn a blind eye to the rampant *dedovshchina* in his unit, preferring to sprawl out in the grass with a book, sleep, and shoot bottles rather than take on the responsibilities assigned to him. Several times while holding watch, the conscript follows the lieutenant with his sights, entertaining the idea of how easy it would be to get away with pulling the trigger, but he never does. This action is echoed by Babchenko in *Voina*: “Выстрелить в спину подонку офицеру в наших глазах отнюдь не подлость, а обычное возмездие (to shoot into the back of a scum officer wasn’t low in our eyes, but ordinary retribution).” Retribution is an action taken against an enemy, here depicted not as the Chechens, but their own officers. This removes the Chechen from the narrative not only as a victim, but as the enemy as well. As one reviewer describes *Voina*: “Бабченко описывает не русско-чеченскую войну, а русскую войну, войну русских против самих себя... (Babchenko describes not a Russo-Chechen War, but a Russian war, a war of Russians against their own)” (Volodarskii). The voice of the Chechen is silenced completely in the fight of the common soldier against the powers of his own government that sent him.

Through the description of his experience as a soldier during the first and second Chechen wars, Babchenko, the conscript/*kontraktnik*, presents a view of the Russian government as utterly ineffective and corrupt, plagued by bleak oppressiveness and violence that extend through every aspect of life. Just as for Karasev, the war for Babchenko was not the theme of his works, but a setting with which to launch a political protest, describing the utter cruelty the Russian government was willing to put its own people through. “Babchenko’s [...] writing is an impassioned ethical attempt to try and reveal the metaphorical fangs behind the mask, to expose the wider hidden rationalities and mendacities of the war in Chechnya” (McSorely).

Babchenko's work contains an explicit challenge to the political system in Russia, despite his own claim that he was writing merely to have his own say (высказаться) or, as he said in an interview with *The Guardian*, that writing offered a means of recovery and was not intended "to mount a political attack against Russia's rulers" (Kharchenko, Clothier).

Central to this protest is Babchenko's portrayal of the government and high command, as founded on the notion of personal betrayal. He views every act of violence, every dead soldier and civilian, and every feeling of pain as directly caused by the current regime: "Я писал не потому, что я любил людей, а потому, что я их ненавижу. У меня была полная потеря веры в человечество, полное разочарование в обществе. Я считал, что и государство, и общество меня предали (I wrote, not because I love people, but because I hate them. I had a complete loss of faith in humanity, a full disappointment in society. I believe that the government and society betrayed me)." Despite the harm he experienced coming from the hands of fellow soldiers, he doesn't blame them for their violence and inhumanity. According to his portrayal, they are merely born of the system, of the war itself. The real fault lies in the hands of those higher up "who drove [them] into war and killed [them] by the hundreds (нас гнали на войну и убивали сотнями)." Here again, though the agent in killing Russian soldiers may have been the Chechen fighters, Babchenko places sole responsibility on the government: "Ведь мы даже еще стрелять не умели, мы не могли убить человека — не знали, как это делать, и все, на что мы были способны, — это плакать и умирать. И мы умирали... Нас предали все, и мы умирали (After all, we couldn't even shoot, we couldn't kill a person. We didn't know how to do it, and all we were capable of was to cry and die. And we died... They all betrayed us, and we died)."

Death, pain, and despair hound the reader page after page with no respite, and frequently the stories lead back to a social or political commentary about how those who died were “regular guys who didn’t have the money to buy their way out...all those who the government destroyed with predatory reforms and then tossed out to die (умирают обычные парни, у которых не было денег откупиться...всех тех, кого государство разорило грабительскими реформами, а потом бросило подыхать).” The focus of the account is not on the progression of military strategy, but on the repetition of the suffering the soldiers endured. The discomfort, frustration, and trauma the soldiers in both *Voina* and *Chechenskie rasskazy* endure is described as an inherent feature of the Russian military, not as result of actions by Chechen combatants. The military system itself is the enemy, and the theme of betrayal by the government even takes on an active and malicious role as described by Babchenko. Karasev writes of cruelty and injustice experienced by the soldiers but without an obvious culprit. Babchenko, however, is forthright in bitterly and bluntly assigning blame: “[t]hey sent us – and go. Your job is to die and not quibble (Послали — и иди. Твое дело — подыхать и не вякать).”

In contrast to the excerpts mentioned by Brodsky of the Russian captain, Mironov’s *Ya byl na etoi voine*, in which he directly expresses his contempt for Chechens and what he assumes to be their misguided and naïve reasons for fighting, Babchenko never discusses Chechen motives and passes no judgment on their actions. His obsession with the betrayal by his own side dominates every recorded memory. Back in Moscow, transporting coffins with the remains of boys who died in Chechnya, he realizes the discord of his presence in the capital of the country, surrounded by wealth, warmth, excess, and carefree people after experiencing “four months existing between life and death, undercooked dog meat, corpses, lice, despair and fear (четыре месяца между жизнью и смертью, недоваренная собачатина, трупы, вши, безнадега,

страх).” Violence toward the Chechens was a natural part of life in the war in the sense of defense, but “retribution (возмездие)” was solely reserved for the betrayal of fellow Russians.

The Victim/Perpetrator

By choosing to exclude the suffering of military and civilian Chechens and focus instead on the struggles and injustice within the Russian military, Karasev and Babchenko create an identity of being victims themselves, rather than perpetrators of violence. They avoid any agency or responsibility for being participants in a war on a side that committed egregious human rights violations. They portray themselves as powerless or unwilling victims in their accounts, despite having voluntarily continued with their military service again after conscription. In Jean Scandlyn’s article concerning the “victim/volunteer” contradiction of US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, she discusses how “soldiers necessarily challenge definitive, either/or categorisation as perpetrators versus heroes, or as volunteers versus victims.” However, the accounts of Russian soldiers discussed here not only challenge this distinction but also provide justification for the actions of their authors by focusing on a lack of agency and control in their circumstances.

Babchenko and Karasev wrote, not to say “I was there” as Hynes states, but to underline their role as a specifically passive one, to say, as I suggest here, “I suffered.” A similar situation arose after the South African Border War as noted by Christo Doherty, in which young conscripts, who took an active part in the violence and fighting, wrote about their personal suffering and PTSD in their memoirs, “providing an opportunity for them to distance themselves from the ethical implications of their own involvement in the war” (Doherty). In his article “Trauma and the Conscript Memoirs of the South African 'Border War,’” Doherty discusses how the authors of these memoirs create a new identity of “victim-perpetrator” that allows for a re-

interpretation of their experience through the lens of suffering, rather than accepting the burden of the actions as participants in the violence or recognizing the horrors committed against the native populations. He underlines the importance of examining the stories of conscripts who published their memoirs as a form of “[engagement] with larger national narratives about the meaning of the Border War” (28). These accounts were a continuation of the current discourse regarding ethnicity in South Africa, but they also presented counter-narratives to a public which had largely forgotten about the soldiers who fought. Similarly, the authors of *Voina* and *Chechenskie rasskazy* were able to reach a wide readership within the Russian public sphere through publishing and revealed an ethnocentric discourse by the focus on their status as Russians as the primary victims of the war. This reflects the prevalent apathy in Russian society concerning abuses against Chechens. These accounts simultaneously offered a view of the war that ran counter to the official narrative that had ignored the soldiers who suffered.

In his research, Doherty compares how the conscripts interpreted their experience through the discourse established by the Vietnam War. This centered around “[locating] culpability for the war in American society or its politicians rather than among the soldiers who served in Vietnam – but without losing the notion of American soldiers as perpetrators” (46). This can be directly correlated to Babchenko and Karasev’s books, both of which relate critiques of the government, Russian Army, and society, removing fault from the soldiers themselves. The experiences of the Chechens were brushed aside with a “competing narrative of victimhood” that focused on the ethnic Russians who were forced to flee Chechnya and Russian soldiers who were executed or sold into slavery by the rebels (Oushakine 154). The Vietnam War can also be compared to the wars in Chechnya according to the lack of a cohesive ideology, as Hynes describes, “a war without a front... a story without a plot” (206). The war in Chechnya had the

same effect. How could a narrative be formed in which a soldier did the bidding of a government who treated him like cannon fodder, sent to kill fellow citizens? In order to eliminate the contradictions in their personal stories, the authors presented themselves as victims, not in opposition to the Chechens, but suffering from the same regime and systems perpetuating the war. Essential to their stories is a lack of agency and vocal condemnation of the forces extending from government and high command.

The accounts of Babchenko and Karasev ignore the role Russian soldiers played in contributing to the violence or even in the well-documented human rights abuses and war crimes (Gerber, Felgenhauer). They instead focus on their own suffering as victims without will or choice of their own, persecuted by the government, the army, and fellow soldiers. Even as a voluntary contract, Babchenko's language still reflects his victimhood and the perceived absence of choice he experienced as a conscript: "Сломали они мне жизнь, понимаешь? ...Сейчас мы добровольцы потому, что тогда они загнали нас сюда силком. Не можем мы без человечины больше. Мы психи с тобой, понимаешь? (They ruined my life, do you understand? Now we're volunteers because they drove us here by force. We can't live without human flesh anymore. We're all psychos, you included, understand?)."

Here his choice to return as a volunteer *kontraktnik* is not described as voluntary at all, but rather a compulsion due to the psychological damage that had been inflicted on him. In an interview with *Neuer Zürcher Zeitung* in 2008, he continues the narrative of victimhood, describing his work as a journalist after his military service:

When Yeltsin wanted to be president of a superpower and attacked Chechnya, little Babchenko was sent to do the job. Now Medvedev wants to be the president of a superpower and is fighting in South Ossetia - and Babchenko is sent off again to photograph burning soldiers (Plath).

Despite his horrific experience as a soldier, he willingly continues work as a war correspondent, but still accepts no responsibility for his personal actions. Here he does not view his work as a choice, but is instead “sent off” as if his life were directly controlled by the government or the president himself. The problem in structuring identity from the perspective of victim rather than perpetrator is that it allows the author to engage in the ethnocentric viewpoint discussed by Nyugen, ignoring the experiences of other victims such as the Chechen fighters and civilians.

The narratives of Babchenko and Karasev present the story of the soldiers who were used and discarded by an uncaring and brutal government and ignore or justify their part as perpetrators of violence themselves, whether against opposing combatants, civilians, or even fellow soldiers. They focus on the subject’s identity as a victim, even as they perpetuate the very violence they condemn. In their stories, the brutal system of the military produced violence as a reaction to the horror of battle experience and was a force that they could not avoid. Karasev describes arriving at a military base, the men all “embittered, unable to understand any words other than swearing, and submitting only to a strong fist (озлобленных, не понимающих никаких слов, кроме матерных, а подчиняющихся только крепкому кулаку).” In such an environment, he views the development of a tough, severe disciplinary attitude as a necessity of the situation. In an example of this, he strikes a soldier who was sleeping at his post, and in doing so, becomes an active participant in the propagation of violence as a form of discipline and military norm.

Brutality is thus represented as an appropriate reaction to unruly and incompetent soldiers in Karasev’s account. His professional military education “could in no way be of use in the Chechen mountains (на срочной службе... никак не могло пригодиться в чеченских горах).” Violence became a form of adaptation compensating for a lack of adequate preparation, but this

does not dim the portrayal of himself as a selfless and diligent soldier. This is illustrated in the descriptions of his fortitude, discipline, and positive leadership qualities, “not slacking in [his] duties to climb to the most distant posts, paying no attention, as sometimes happened, to the blizzards (Я относился к этой обязанности ответственно, не ленился подниматься на самые дальние посты, не обращая, случалось, внимания на ливень).” However, his best efforts to be an inspiring leader and commander yield no results and soldiers under him repeatedly fail to fall in line with his expectations, even concerning matters of their own life and safety. They habitually sleep at their posts and lounge about the camp, helmets and body armor lying unused. In this way, Karasev portrays himself as hindered in his well-intentioned efforts to be a good leader by the laziness of the soldiers beneath him, establishing himself as the victim of circumstances that are pitted against him from the start.

Even in direct examples of military superiority and positions of power while facing the enemy, the perspective shared is one of terror, not triumph. During a ceasefire, Babchenko’s unit is forced to go through several checkpoints manned by the rebel fighters. He describes a Chechen trader looking at him, laughing, and then drawing a finger across his own throat. Babchenko responds by aiming his automatic at him, removing the safety, and placing his finger on the trigger. Even in this advantageous and aggressive position, the conscript/*kontraktnik* feels no more secure under the defiant gaze of the Chechen: “[с]мотрит так, будто уже убил меня и я его трофеей, он не видит меня живого, а видит только мою отрезанную голову ([h]e looks at me as though he’s already killed me and I’m his trophy, he doesn’t see me as being alive, but sees only my cut-off head).” His position of power does nothing to shift his self-perception of victimhood that is supported not only by his feelings of fear, but also his refusal to answer the

Chechen with mutual feelings of animosity. This allows an interpretation of his reaction as one of defense against a hostile enemy, rather than an offensive act against an unarmed civilian.

Karasev relates the story of another lieutenant by the name of Grozovoi (meaning thunderous in Russian), who, “despite his formidable surname,” was short, shy, and inexperienced. Later upon returning from Chechnya, he “got nervous and hit one soldier hard. The soldier impudently threatened to take it to court because he hadn’t gone to Chechnya (Громовой нервничал и больно ударил одного солдата. Солдат нагло грозился подать в суд, потому что не ездил в Чечню).” The soldier was within his rights to report the flagrant abuse, but in Karasev’s view, Grozovoi, the superior officer, is not faulted in any way for striking a soldier under his command. On the contrary, the soldier who threatens to take him to court is portrayed as being at fault for his lack of understanding of proper military respect and procedure. It is implied that had he fought in Chechnya as Grozovoi had, he would not have had the gall to threaten a court case over such a small offense. There, abuse of subordinates was an accepted and common practice in place of appropriate discipline. Observed here is a confusion of what is or is not permissible and lawful. The lack of clear military law and order left soldiers to develop their own methods of survival and discipline in which “without the ideological and legal support of the state, the soldier’s military experience could easily mutate into an act of banditry (Oushakine 137). The perpetrator is turned into a victim of the system and the soldier who dared to seek defense through lawful means is treated with contempt. This illustrates how responsibility for personal actions is disregarded and identity is reconstructed through a passive viewpoint where the main character is subjected to cruel and unavoidable circumstance.

Passivity and the inability to exercise personal will as a means of effecting change is not a recent or isolated occurrence in the Russian military. One memoir from the Russian Civil War

in the early twentieth century describes a soldier who “associated the war with a loss of individual agency. It was the war, and not he himself, that determined the course of his actions” (Guillory). The tradition of an acceptance of violence accompanied by a denial of responsibility leads to a damaging and disruptive effect on the military and its members. This is revealed in an account of a conscript related by Karasev who sees the hardening of his character through violence in the military as a positive effect on his preparation as a soldier:

В армию я уходил своенравным драчуном. Но я был городским мальчиком из интеллигентной семьи. Из учебки в полк я возвращаюсь жёстким агрессивным волчонком. И эти качества теперь жизненно необходимы мне. Я готов к самому худшему.³

Despite the beatings, torturous conditions, and psychological humiliation, he is grateful in the end for what he perceives as proper “education.” His outlook is key to understanding the perpetuation of violence within the military. By justifying abuse as helpful and even necessary, the author legitimates its continued, unquestioned use.

The victim narrative only strengthened when the authors returned home and they realized the apathetic or even hostile attitude of society toward veterans. Although the soldiers felt that they had experienced something bigger than the civilian population could ever understand, they realized that few were even interested in hearing their stories. The war had been an embarrassment and largely a failure. The veterans only served as reminders of that. Even though the war touched many people in one way or another, it had no great rallying cry as wars of the past like the Great Patriotic War. There was no collective effort in the war. Those who fought in it had too low of a status in society to elicit mass concern and media was kept to a minimum by

³ I went into the army with a willful pugnaciousness. But I was a city boy from an educated family. From my lessons in the regiment I’m returning a tough, aggressive wolf-cub. And now these qualities are of life-and-death importance to me. I’m prepared for the very worst.

laws restricting reporting. Veterans of the Chechen Wars were not only not treated with respect as defenders of Russia's interest and people, but ostracized, distrusted, and treated with scorn. With issues of the economy and corruption causing more concern for most citizens, the war in Chechnya took a backseat.

Doherty argues that PTSD diagnosis allows for an “ethical loophole” in which perpetrators of violence become victims as well. While not referencing PTSD explicitly, both Karasev and Babchenko frame their experiences through the hardships they endured and their personal lack of control. A key aspect of victimhood represented in both accounts is the way in which war ruins soldiers, disrupting their reintegration as normal members of society after fighting in the war: “[у] нас нет будущего...Нам некуда возвращаться, потому что наше прошлое осталось где-то далеко ([w]e have no future...There's nowhere for us to return because our past remains somewhere far away).” Babchenko here focuses on the way war has ruined its participant in a psychological way. They are locked between the war in Chechnya that threatens their lives and the inability to return to the lives they left.

This rift between the military and civilian world becomes apparent to him during duty in Moscow as part of a “special cargo” unit, responsible for delivering coffins of dead soldiers. There, Babchenko experiences a greater discord than on the front lines in Chechnya. He feels “absurd” and “worn out” in a dirty uniform among the “expensive cars, casinos, dancing clubs, beer, girls, happiness, and lightheartedness (нелепо, ущербным...дорогие авто, казино, дискотеки, пиво, девочки, веселье, беззаботность)” in Russia's capital. His military service has forever stained his view of the civilian sphere—a world to which he no longer belongs. Although he personally feels rejected and betrayed by those who did not fight in the war, he enforces his own isolation and perception of victimhood.

Babchenko represents no other identity than one oppressed, in pain, and suffering. “[M]uch of soldiering is passive endurance: standing, not flinching, surviving” (Hynes 3). He sees himself reduced to something sub-human: “...я уже почти окончательно превратился в животное... ([a]lready I had almost once and for all turned into an animal).” The pain, cold, hate, and horror he endures daily take a toll on his very humanity. In order to survive through passively enduring, he separates himself from choice and agency, making him into an animal of instinct. Babchenko even pities another soldier who is unable to adapt to the inhumanity of their circumstances: “Витька так и не смог привыкнуть к тому, что он — чмо бессловесное, черт канявый, животное, и каждый тумак повергает его в депрессию (...he still can’t get used to the fact that he is a nonperson, a lowlife, a dumb animal, and every punch sends him into a depression)” (*One Soldier’s War*, translation by Nick Allen). This coping mechanism is also discussed in the same article concerning the Russian Civil War memoirs. As far back as the tradition of violence stretches in the Russian military, so do the methods of dealing with a diminished sense of humanity:

War challenges the very existence of a rational self; the pressures of survival reduce a soldier to a more base, instinctual, and corporeal man. War is ultimately an experience of wild reaction and response, endurance, and strain, which subordinates the logic of the mind to the illogic of the emotions and the body (Guillory).

By enforcing the rhetoric coming down through abuse from other soldiers, Babchenko forfeits his “rational self” and agency. However, this frees him of responsibility for his actions and consequent guilt, supporting his narrative of victimhood. In his account, this even frees the soldiers who beat him of their responsibility as well: “[e]сли остальные избивали меня просто потому, что так надо... ([i]f the rest beat me, it was simply because that’s how it was done).”

Naumov, a conscript in *Chechenskie rasskazy* shares a similarly helpless view of the cycle of abuse:

Презирать старослужащих, а через год стать таким же? («Таким я не буду, а буду хорошим» – здесь не проходит.) Но когда ты солдат, относиться как-то иначе к офицерам просто невозможно, ты, не задумываясь, принимаешь правила игры.⁴

Viewed in this context, none hold responsibility and all are victims of the system which bore them. Not only does this permit the violence within the system of the military, it excuses the crimes committed against others, including noncombatants.

Conclusion

The vacuum created by the absence of a strong state in post-Soviet society was a key factor in forming soldiers' views of their military service in Chechnya. The lack of a cohesive discourse concerning motivations for the wars as well as “deep political ambiguity and the overwhelming distrust that this ambiguity caused” led to a disintegration of public trust and a feeling of betrayal on the part of the combatants. The wars did not highlight a strong sense of Russian nationalism, but an inner conflict between the government and its citizens. However, in this view, Chechens were left out of the narrative almost entirely. Babchenko and Karasev attempted to make sense of their military service through their memoirs, but in doing so, they perpetuated Russian ethnocentrism, dismissing the suffering the Chechen combatants and civilians experienced as a result of the wars. The personal experiences they describe are key to revealing the common soldier's perception of the war and his role in it. While two books published by veterans of the Chechen war cannot form a complete picture of the experience of all

⁴ Detest the older conscripts, and then after a year become the same as them? (“I won't be like that, I'll be good” didn't work here). But when you're a soldier, relating to officers otherwise simply wasn't possible; without giving it a second thought, you accept the rules of the game.

Russian soldiers during this time, these accounts provide a deeper insight into the experiences of those involved than what would surface in official records alone. As Hynes mentions in the introduction to his book, to “understand what war is like and how it *feels*, we must turn away from history and its numbers, and seek the reality in the personal witness of the men who were there” (xii).

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