

Elena Rozhdestvenskaia

## Russian Letters from the Front: Egodocuments and Witnesses of Time

This article studies letters written by Russians from the front in various wars of the twentieth century. The letter from the front is an intimate egodocument; it speaks about the attitude of a combatant in the context of the front and its circumstances while, at the same time, providing a reflection of the discursive regime of the era that defined and shaped the dominant modes of written communication of the author. A socially oriented narrative analysis of letters from the front allows us to outline the professional attitude to war, the evolution of military professionalism, military ethos and military discourse.

### Introduction

War retains a significant place in Russian cultural memory, playing a key role in the shaping of a collective Russian identity. Why does state ideology continue to draw upon this source of symbolism, despite the fact that veterans who have memories of the Second World War are increasingly fewer in number?

Sociology offers a partial answer regarding the role war plays in Russian national culture. That answer has to do with the so-called culture of war, and with *negative identity*, that is, an identity defined in relation to an outsider or other. Thus, the famed Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov concluded that the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet Union's victory are treated as the most important and posi-

tive events in contemporary national history, which led him to theorize the idea of a 'culture of war' (Gudkov 2005: 40–41). War demarcates a semantic field within which the main ideological conflicts of contemporary Russia play out. The exploitation of this victory has led to ever-new ways of *making contemporary* the experience of war, to a search for new ways to commemorate it, and to prolong the life of this event that is still of such great significance to the Russians.

Gudkov's thesis about Russia's culture of war also applies to other military campaigns of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods: the Afghan war, the Chechen campaigns, the participation in the Syrian conflict, and so on. One of the tools used for the

creation of these discourses is soldiers' letters from the front. In a certain sense, an examination of Russian letters from the fronts of various twentieth-century wars is an attempt to find the human dimension of these events, mediated by ideology. Jochen Hellbeck formulates his own question about everyday life in the Stalin era as follows: 'What did ideology really offer a person, apart from its purely instrumental use? What parts of the ideological text did an individual master and what were the consequences of the productive interaction of the ideology and the human *I*?' (Hellbeck 2010). Hellbeck's approach focuses on the active participation of the individual in the process of mastering a pervasive ideology, on how individuals play an active role in reproducing ideology. 'Ideology forced a person to read the world through its lenses, it forced individuals to structure an understanding of themselves and thus give the meaning to the ideology itself' (Hellbeck 2010). For us, the question is: what kind of subjective work is behind the transformation of psychological experience – in our case the experience of participation in the war – into the ideological consciousness of a person of the era? Hellbeck proposes a dialogical connection

between the concepts of ideology and subjectivity, through which an active adapting individual personalizes ideological content through his subjectivity. 'Consequently', he writes, 'ideology should be viewed as an adapting force; it retains its influence to the extent that it continues to operate at the level of individuals, who ideologically apply it to themselves and to the world around them. Almost all the logic of the main revolutionary narratives of transformation (transformation of oneself and social space), collectivization (collectivization of individual producers and oneself) and purification (political cleansing and acts of personal improvement) were produced and reproduced by the Soviet citizens themselves, who tirelessly rationalized impenetrable political programs and, thus, were an ideological force, acting on a par with the leaders of the party and the state' (Hellbeck 2010). Based on this dialogic connection, between the concepts of ideology and subjectivity, Hellbeck proposes an exploratory way of finding a rationalization strategy, such as the ability of social actors to generate logical grounds for the events of that time and, we might add, to legitimize their own actions.

Thus, studies on the reconstruction of subjectivity empirically look at the narrative traces of this subjective processing of experience. Such traces are, first of all, personal documents like letters, diaries, memoirs and even informers' reports. As Evgenii Dobrenko writes, 'a subject expressing himself through writing, realizing himself in the text is already a subject not so much of political and social history, but of cultural history' (Dobrenko 2012). Therefore, the genre of the letter, in the context of its time and constraints, is a communicative universe, the voice on which can sound both muffled and rhetorical. However, as Dobrenko polemically notes, 'identity finds itself in a letter, but a letter is not a voice yet. The voice forms itself in cultural texts and is a product of personal processing of experience' (Dobrenko 2012).

This article asks whether it is possible to find, in the letters from the front, rationalizations of the subjective experience, and whether the individual voice is discernable in the collective production of news from the *theatre of military operations*. It seeks also to understand its role.

#### 1. Letters From the Front as Egodocuments

Letters written from the front retain a significant place in war historiography: these personal documents allow to have a glimpse of what the individual and collective understanding of some of the most important historical events is. The twentieth century, with its numerous wars, has left an epistolary legacy spanning multiple generations, and tightly intertwined with the culture of letter- and memoir-writing. The resulting archival collections of wartime letters have consequently become the basis for the formation of a historiographical culture that demands academic rigour in their selection, classification, and analysis (c.f. Zlokazov 1996; Lokteva 2005; Zhuchkov, Somov 2003; Pushkarev 2000; Bulygina 2005). A letter from the front remains a striking *personal* document, with personal and familial significance; upon examination, this letter can also serve as a *socio-historical* document that reveals the writer's relationship to historical events, to their context and circumstances, and to the daily routines of war. What interpretive framework do historians use to analyze letters from the front?

The historiography of wartime letters is characterized by

attention to the presence of informational signposts in each letter. The changes in these signposts indicate the evolution of the form and the contents of the epistolary source throughout the entire war, the transformation of its structure and its semantics, language, and formulas... They presuppose paying attention to their origins, as well as the circumstances of their writing [...] the role and position of the reader, who is also the addressee of the letter (Ivanov 2009: 4).

Also significant is the background against which the letter was written, which elucidates the relation between historical facts and the events described in the letter. In this sense, the letters of midshipman Vsevolod Evgen'evich Egor'ev to his father during the Russo-Japanese War, published in a recent anthology (Ushakin et al. 2016), are particularly revealing. The intimate correspondence between two career navy officers, who are also father and son, contains mentions and detailed descriptions of military events, thus fulfilling one of the most significant functions of a historical document, i.e. to provide information. Sift-

ing through the letters for mentions of the quality of weaponry, the circumstances of battle, the roles of civilians, the motivations of the sailors, and the particularities of leisure activities, a military historian can derive a substantial interpretation of the state of the army and the society surrounding it.

At the same time, a letter from the front serves as a personal egodocument that reflects the dominant discourses of the period and shapes the dominant forms of written communication. A letter, as a mass form of communication, embodies a structure made up of a number of *necessary* and expected components. The methodology of analyzing war letters proposed by Sergei Kashtanov (Kashtanov 1988) divides this *unspoken formula* into three parts. The first, the *opening protocol*, contains the address, the name of the letter's author, the addressee, and the greeting. The main portion of the letter contains a preamble, an indication of the letter's aims and narrative, and an outline of the subject of the letter; the final part includes a conclusion, a farewell, a mention of the time and place, and a signature or seal. The presence of this structure in the personal letters of various periods and cultures highlights its universality, and a

comparative analysis of various collections and archives of epistolary writing reveals the presence (or absence) of significant differences in this structure.

The present article highlights this dual aspect of epistolary writing – the way it functions simultaneously as an egodocument and as a reflection of cultural discourse, insofar as it reveals the discursive trends of contemporary culture. Those at war *work* – that is, fight; they have everyday routines; the body experiences losses and deprivations; there is love, sex, rape; the war can advance one's career and lead to honours and glory; the war can create its own narrative, which does not always line up with propaganda and ideology. For the purposes of this article, we limit ourselves to one particular theme, which we trace through the letters collected in the aforementioned anthology – all of which have the benefit of having known attributions. This theme is the professional relationship to the war, which obviously underwent change throughout the twentieth century. How are understandings of military professionalism similar (or different) during the Second Boer War in Transvaal (1899–1902), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), the First World War (1914–1918),

the Second World War (1939–1945) and the relatively recent wars in Afghanistan (1979–1989) and Chechnya (1994–1995 and 1999–2000)? Although this article cannot provide an exhaustive answer to this question, a socio-logically-inflected narrative analysis of diverse letters from Russian soldiers during the various wars of the twentieth century allows us to identify how this concept of war as work is treated in the letters.

## 2. The Texts under Analysis

The corpus of texts analyzed by this article is made up of letters collected by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists (including the author of this article), which represent a sample of wartime correspondence throughout the twentieth century, and have been selected from private collections, archives and museum collections, and include also letters published previously from inaccessible sources. Letters from the Russian wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya are provided by the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' *Mothers of Russia*.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> The Union of Committees of Soldiers' *Mothers of Russia* is a Russian human rights organization founded in 1998. It

corpus runs to 840 pages in total and is comprised of 123 selected letter exchanges.

### 3. War as Labour

In order to achieve an understanding of military professionalism from these letters, two approaches are possible. On the one hand, a letter reveals a particular period's practices and understandings of war. On the other hand, the evolution of military professionalism, the ethics of war, and the public discourses surrounding it frame our reading of these letters. Furthermore, this evolution requires a careful consideration of what changes – and what remains the same – within this existentially borderline sphere of human experience.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Russia already had an extensive military bibliography, rich of the names of Russian military strategists and army researchers, such as the professors of the Nikolaev Academy of the General Staff Nikolai Andreevich Korf, Nikolai Petrovich Mikhnevich, Nikolai Nikolaevich Golovin and others. They addressed the problems of the modernization of the army and

adaptation of military doctrines, structure and functions of the army as a social institution, its stratification structure and the influence of war and peace on public life. In their writings, they engaged with the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, Rudolf Sebald Steinmetz, Antoine Henri Jomini and others. Golovin, who wrote more than 30 monographs on the Russian army, introduces the concepts of 'moral elasticity of the troops' and 'military tension of the country', which are operationalized through a set of empirical indicators (Golovin 1938). For Golovin, the pragmatics of military affairs were accompanied by attention to the *moral factor* of war, the state of the psychology of soldiers and officers, the division of army activities in peacetime and wartime, the ideal hierarchy of highly specialized social roles in the army and its reproduction through the military education system, the degree of preparation of Russia to future wars. Concerning military professionalism and its specifics, the ideas of von Clausewitz, a military theorist, Prussian officer and military writer, whose works were reprinted in Soviet Russia of the 1930s (Clausewitz 1980) were popular in Russia. Clausewitz's idea that war has its own

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unites over 200 committees of soldiers' mothers.

grammar suggests that military professionals can and should perfect their knowledge of this grammar *without outside influence* (Huntington 1957: 57).

The critical literature on military professionalism includes the seminal volumes *The Soldier and the State* by Samuel Huntington (Huntington 1957) and *The Professional Soldier* by Morris Janowitz (Janowitz 1960). These works, acclaimed in the West, but less known in Russia, propose an analytic framework for military professionalism. Janowitz, for example, links military professionalism above all to military *effectiveness*, which is limited by civilian control. Nonetheless, for Janowitz, the very possibility of an *apolitical soldier* is an illusion, since soldiers are active participants in maintaining national security (Janowitz 1960: 342). On the other hand, according to Huntington, military officers' expertise is based on 'the direction, operation, and control of a human organization whose primary function is the application of violence' (Huntington 1957: 10). This organizational control includes '(1) the organizing, equipping, and training of this force; (2) the planning of its activities; (3) the direction of its operation in and out of combat' (Huntington 1957: 10). Im-

portantly, Huntington emphasizes that this expertise pertains distinctly to the officer for the precise reason that it is an expertise in leadership: 'It must be remembered that the peculiar skill of the officer is the management of violence, not the act of violence itself (Huntington 1957: 11). In addition to increased effectiveness, these functions also allow for the control of citizens, since the professional soldier 'strives to distance himself from politics' (Huntington 1957: 84).

These conclusions, it must be noted, reflect a liberal perspective on military matters and a politics of limiting military power. Moreover, the impossibility of extrapolating these conclusions from their context and to apply them to the situation of Russian Empire or the Stalin era of the first half of the twentieth century evidences the profound transformation of discourses. Instead, a particularly useful framework for this article is offered by a writer, military theorist, and author, the Prussian officer von Clausewitz, whose name and authority were respected even in the Tsarist army, and whose works were recognized in the 1930s (Clausewitz 1980). Effectiveness as an indicator of military *professionalism* depends on the context (and in-

cludes an assessment of the qualities of the soldiers and commanders, the organizational structures, the armaments, technologies, teaching methodologies, the level of propaganda, and a number of other factors). Therefore, the historical dynamics of the idea of what is military professionalism changed from '*Ding an sich*' (war has its own grammar, military professionals improve their knowledge in this grammar without any influence (Clausewitz 1980: 991)) to a relative '*Ding für uns*' (military effectiveness limits civil control, as stated in the programmatic works of Huntington (Huntington 2002: 2)).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the semantic shift towards military effectiveness does not obscure the essential idea of military labour as effective violence.

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<sup>2</sup> My search of the current academic literature on military professionalism did not find meaningful discussions bringing the subject of military professionalism to the discussion. Those works that set such a goal are based on a structurally functionalist approach, *reassembling* military professionalism through a set of functions performed. An example: 'A sociological analysis of the concept of military professionalism makes it possible to identify the dialectic of the subjective and objective in the development of various aspects of the individual socialization of military specialists, to develop methods for predicting their professionally determined behavior' (Grishai 2002).

Returning to the narrativization of military work through the medium of front-line writing, it is important to note that a letter from the front contains – or conceals – an entirely different evaluation of military work, i.e. from the perspective of someone who has been sent to the front to fight. Returning to the particular context of the letters under discussion, it is necessary to note the perspective that they reveal, i.e. that of a soldier or officer who is immersed not only in the events, but also in the daily routines of the war. These letter-writers are engaged not only in informal interactions with their comrades on the front, but also in correspondence with those who are on the home front. Modern-day military sociology is oriented towards the 'little man' (Wette 1992) and his experience of the war – including his suffering – and, in the context of the Second World War, his dual role as aggressor and victim. The question traditionally asked, that is, how a soldier manages to survive a mortally dangerous situation, with its risks and uncertainties, on a daily basis (Ziemann 1997), can be answered by describing the daily details of war. Their letters focus on both work and leisure at war. And, like any work, military work has its own



ethos. The meaning of it is to motivate, justify and reward with meaning. As revealed by this collection of letters, the ethos of military work is defined by three aspects: the everyday routines of the front and its occupations, the war as a mega-event on a national and international scale, and the meaning of the idea of a *Homeland*. Thus, the tense opposition between *the Front* and the *Homeland* frames and gives meaning to military work – demanding its intensiveness and legitimizing its sacrifices.

#### 4. Duty and Honour as an Evaluative Framework

In addition to the changing landscape of military conflicts in the twentieth century, the discourses of the wartime letter also changed, reflecting emerging and disappearing motivations and understandings of professionalism and duty. In this sense, letters regarding the voluntary participation in the Second Boer War (1899–1902), addressed to the Russian Red Cross, are particularly revealing.

19 October 1899  
To the Head Administration of the Red Cross, from

surgeon Andrei Andreevich Krause

Declaration.

Having learned from the newspapers that the Red Cross intends to send a medical party to South Africa to offer medical help to the native people in their fight against England, I have the honour of inquiring whether the Society might be able to find a place for me as a doctor on this mission.

I would like to add that I speak both German and French well, and, should I be accepted as part of this mission, I am ready to sacrifice one hundred roubles towards the cause. I humbly request a reply with more details and condition.

Doctor Andrei Krause  
(Ushakin et al. 2016: 34)

12 October 1899

Honoured Directorate,

I write to express my readiness to take part in giving aid to those wounded in the Anglo-Transvaal (Bo-

er) war. I have the honour of wholeheartedly asking, if possible, that you recommend me as a paramedic, medical aide, or a similar position to one of the parties being sent. I have completed an entire course of medical study but, due to unrest among the students, I am currently barred from the State exam. I can furnish evidence of having completed these courses.

Finding myself without work, I have the honour of humbly asking you to fulfil my request and give me the opportunity to apply my knowledge towards practical ends and towards helping the suffering of humanity.

I am ready to depart under whatever conditions you find acceptable.

Humbly and respectfully,  
D. Avarkushevich (Ushakin et al. 2016: 34)

These letters reveal a characteristic understanding of honour as an indicator of personal ethics. The word *honour* appears intermittently in wartime letters throughout the ensuing decades, but in these later texts it no

longer refers to an individual but rather to a collective honour.

The letters under examination also stand out from the point of view of historical sociology. An (objective) verification of the facts described in the letter is less important than the feelings of the individual who writes it and processes what is happening to him in this borderline existential state.<sup>3</sup> It is this fact that makes a letter from the front a *personal* document, and thus one that continues to interest subsequent generations. This interest remains even in those instances which are instrumental in preserving, through a personal narrative, a memory of the war for the purposes of state ideology. The frustration of defeat or the joy of victory are both emotionally loaded and, as such, lay the foundation for solidarity (by contrast, a historical representation of the facts remains intellectual/cognitive rather than *emotional*).

The aforementioned letters between midshipman Vsevolod Evgen'evich Egor'ev and his fa-

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<sup>3</sup> A sociologically-oriented narrative analysis obviously places an emphasis on narrative, since, as Carr points out, 'thanks to the similarity of the structure of the action produced by the individual, and the structure of the narrative, we can usually explain the action by telling the story about it' (Carr 2008: 29).

ther Evgenii Romanovich Egor'ev (Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905) are an example of such a personal document, written as a form of intra-familial communication. Yet the reason for, and contents of, this communication between father and son, both professional military sailors, is the history they have both experienced, due to which, as they write, 'one forgets one's own personal grief'. The privacy of these communications is suggested by the mutual expressions of feelings, but their contents are an unfolding depiction of professional labour, containing meditations on misfortunes and failures, praise of military heroes, and bitter admissions of defeat. Particularly remarkable is Vsevolod's letter dated 12–15 August, through which we can witness the battle as it is occurring, described using the vocabulary of a professional soldier who participates in this battle without losing self-control and later evaluates it, making remarks on its details ('It was only afterwards, when we arrived in Vladivostok, that I was finally able to experience human emotions', he writes):

12 August 1904, cruiser  
*Thunderbolt*

It is time, dearest father, for me to write to you in detail about all the sad, bitter events [...]. I was awakened at half past five by the signaller, who informed me that we were changing course, heading west. I climb up to the bridge, we change course. The sun rises just as we do, and we see, approaching us from a heading of north by northwest, four military vessels. Our first thought is that this is our long-awaited fleet, that *our* fleet is made up of four cruisers: *Izumo*, *Azuma*, *Tokiwa*, and *Iwate*. We didn't have to wait long: by five o'clock, they were 65 cable length away and opened fire. We immediately returned fire (having turned east). Their aim was good, and their first volley of shells nearly hit the *Russia*. I was on the rear bridge, and I admit, these first shells created a great impression. Especially the ricochets, which flew over our heads, stunningly loud and slow, like great black crows. They fly so slowly that you think it's safe to move from where you've fallen. One of the shells took out our

fourth funnel. Of course, we didn't hold back either, we hit some targets as well, we could see the explosions and fires caused by our shells. There was a great fire aboard the *Azuma*, we started cheering, but right after that we spotted a colossal fire aboard the *Riurik*. We fell silent. At 5:30, the *Riurik's* rudder was hit, it was out of action but continued to accompany us until six o'clock, when we tacked northwest [...] At six o'clock, we turned, but behind us, *Riurik* and *Thunderbolt* didn't, and soon they raised a signal: 'the wheel isn't working'. Then a second signal: 'we can't steer'. At this moment, our enemy, who had been focusing on the *Riurik*, made a mistake, veered east, focused its fire on the *Riurik*, and thus gave us an opening to escape north. Around this time three more cruisers joined it: the *Naniwa*, *Takachiho*, and *Niitaka*. They saw that the *Riurik* wasn't following us, we returned, passing between it and the enemy and taking fire meant for it, at a distance of 30 cable length.

After the fire, we returned to the *Riurik* three times and shielded it with our own vessel... (Ushakin et al. 2016: 47)

We can link the military professionalism above to military efficiency, following Huntington, von Clausewitz, and others. However, in this letter efficiency is key, since victory has not been won and military losses are great. But why does it seem like the author is a highly motivated professional military man? If we analyze the letter from the point of view of narrative, the author starts from the exposition (the route taken, the enemy is visible in the form of four ships), goes to the core of the action (the initiative of the enemy in the attack, which was followed by a retaliatory strike), then gives an introspection of his impression (a terrible impression, the perception of time slowing), a description of the effects produced by the attack (they blew up a funnel, the rudder was knocked down, but we could escape), a description of the tactical intrigue of the battle (carried away, the enemy makes mistakes, opens up a free passage for us, a *zugzwang* between a wrecked comrade-ship and an enemy in an effort to protect the side). If we add a subjective di-

mension to the impersonal criterion of the objective description of the effectiveness of the battle, we can see the description of the battle with different eyes: through the eyes of a military man who has exhausted his limits, having done everything he could in the circumstances. Reflective and emotionally responsive, observant and decisive, risking and eventually avoiding his sacrifice. The addressee of this letter is also a professional, military sailor, reading and analyzing the circumstances of the battle. But at the same time, the addressee is his father, who accepts his son's report on a very difficult military test. In this dual optics of kinship and professional relations, there is very little place for the external context: the antitheses *us and them*, the contrasting (yours and your enemies' strangers) names of the ships and the sea, equidistant from hostile territories.

The level of privacy within a wartime letter changes, as can be seen in Soviet times, with their own *premonitions* of war. As Sheila Fitzpatrick writes, 'war is the most likely, perhaps even the inevitable outcome, the last test of the strength of Soviet society and the devotion of its citizens. The present in these conditions was depicted only as a respite "before the beginning of

the new struggle with capitalism" [...]. The military motive was constantly exaggerated in newspapers that posted extensive reviews of the international situation, with special emphasis on the Nazi regime in Germany, the Japanese in Manchuria, the likelihood of seizing power by the fascists in France, as well as the civil war in Spain as an example of open confrontation between *democratic* and *reactionary* forces' (Fitzpatrick 2008: 18). The combination of premonitions and events of the Second World War, refracted through an ideological machine, gives rise to a completely different discursive language of front-line writing.

By shifting our scope and moving to a different regime – the Soviet era and the events of the Second World War – we can observe an entirely different set of discursive practices. Letters are written with the expectation of multiple readers, willing and unwilling. Censorship forces the authors of these letters to express themselves as part of a collective, of a body of people.

The collective mobilization of forces towards victory triumphs over the goal of informing relatives of the soldier's situation, transforming the letter into a public space – this is facilitated in large part by wartime censor-

ship (Russkii Arkhiv 1997: 85–88).

On 13 November 1941, I.V. Panfilov wrote to his wife.

Greetings, dear Murochka!

First of all, I'm eager to share good news with you. Mura, you have likely heard on the radio – and they write about it a lot in the newspapers – about the heroic deeds of soldiers and commanders, including my own. The trust placed in me – to defend our own capital – is being justified. You won't believe, Murochka, how good my commanders and soldiers are – they are true patriots, they fight like lions, and in each of their hearts there is only one desire: to keep the enemy out of our capital, to mercilessly destroy these scoundrels. Death to fascism!

Mura, today, according to an official order, hundreds of soldiers and commanders have been awarded the Order of the USSR. Two days ago, I received a third Order of the Red Banner. This is just the beginning, Mura. I believe my entire division will become

guardsmen soon – we already have three Heroes [of the Soviet Union – E.R.]. Our motto is that we all become heroes. Mura, adieu. Be sure to read the newspapers, you will see there the doings of the Bolsheviks.

Now, Mura, how are you all? How are things in Kirgizia, how are the children doing in school, how is my Makushechka? I miss you dearly, but I think that fascism will come to an end soon, and then we will again be able to work together towards the great goals of communism.

Valia is doing well. I think that even she will be awarded the Order soon. They have accepted her into the Party and are very happy with her work.

Murochka, I sent you one thousand roubles...

Dearest Mura, you are very sparing, you don't write to me at all. In all this time I have only received one letter from you. Write more often, you know how happy it makes me to receive news from home. Write.

I send my kisses to you and the children: Zhenia, Viva, Galochka and my

dear Makochka. Say hello  
to all of them...

Write to this address: Act-  
ing army, division head-  
quarters

Kisses, yours,

I. Panfilov (Ushakin et al.  
2016: 54)

In this letter to his wife, Panfilov is very keen to share his joy. And what does joy mean at the front? The heroic deeds of the fighters and commanders, to whom the combatant also belongs, which will be reported in newspapers and on the radio. Their effective military work is valued in every sense and encouraged by awards. This passage is completed by the slogan 'Death to Fascism!', which hints at the presence of censors who read it, but also potentially creates the impression that the text was made to be read aloud to relatives and friends. In the letter the pathos of military success is inferior to the private, to questions about children, the social success of relatives, and their material support. Here we learn that military work is well paid ('sent one thousand roubles'). In full accordance with the letter formula, its author finishes with enumerations of names and emotional declarations. There is an evident hierarchy in the structure of the letter: first public,

then private. However, emotional content is not restricted to the private domain; rather, both spheres are full of emotions. According to Hellbeck, the Soviet man is simultaneously and actively integrated in the different discursive registers and socialized in their dynamics.

The access of military and state authorities to this space taught the authors of these letters to use a standard language to describe the events of the war. This is particularly evident in letters from the front that deal with the death of a combatant:

14 May 1942

Letter from military com-  
missar Muhamediarov K.  
Shopokovii

Dear Kerimbubu!

We received your letter and the photograph of your husband that you sent us, for which we are very grateful and to which we eagerly reply.

We understand the grief and sorrow you suffer for the death of your heroically fallen husband, killed by the German barbarians. We share this grief and sorrow, having lost such a steadfast and brave hero -

a guardsman deeply devoted to the cause of the party of Lenin and to his socialist homeland, who placed the defence and happiness of its millions of inhabitants above his own life. But his death, the death of a hero – is a great deed, which will give glory and fame to his name throughout the entire Union. The names and deeds of the 28 guardsman heroes – including your husband, are known by all, from young pioneers to grey-haired elders, their names and deeds are celebrated by the people in songs, in *byliny*<sup>4</sup> composed in their honour; their names will be written by the history of humanity on its golden scrolls.

The state surrounds the families of these 28 heroes with comfort, love, and warmth. The decision of the Kyrgyz SSR to preserve the memory of the Hero of the Soviet Union, the commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Red Banner rifle division, who was awarded the Order of Lenin, the major-general Panfilov and the 28

guardsman heroes, fallen in a struggle with the German invaders on their approach to Moscow, highlights the exceptional care of the state towards the families of these 28 heroes.

We are overjoyed by the kind, energetic tone of your letter; it gives us new strength to continue fighting the German barbarians. You embody all that a Soviet woman should be. Despite your grief, you have not bowed your head, you have not let your hands fall, you look bravely forward.

Going forth, do not bow that proud head of a Soviet woman. Devote all your strength, all your energy, to strengthening the homeland, to defending your country, to defeating those responsible for all our calamities – that great enemy of humanity, German fascism. Those of us on the front, sent by you to defend the lives, freedom, and happiness of children and wives, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, we will take our revenge on our cowardly enemies for their evil deeds, for the blood they have

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<sup>4</sup> *Byliny* are Russian folk epic song about heroic events.



spilled, the cities, towns, and villages they have destroyed, for all the disasters they have brought us. Work in peace! We will not allow them to take one step farther! The day approaches when we will have dealt for good with Hitler's criminal gang. Our glorious Red Army and the heroic people, standing in solidarity, our Communist Party guarantee it. Together with you – who fight on a different front, that of labour – we will carry out our orders. This year, we will definitely defeat German fascism and liberate our native Soviet land from the filthy hordes of barbarian Germans.

Our greetings to all at the kolkhoz! A big, Bolshevik, warrior's *hello* for you, dear Kerimbubu!

Write to us, we will be happy to receive news from home.

A communist greeting from the battle commissar Mukhamediarov (Ushakin et al. 2016: 57–58)

This is an example of high-register Soviet writing, and is primarily informative. It is a message about the death of a

combatant, however Commissioner Mukhamediarov's letter also performs other roles. The letter has a frame – *work for victory, despite the grief of loss* – suggestively directing the reading of the letter, permeated by the mention of emotions. Multiple meanings are woven into this directing discursive influence: we (not only the writer) understand your grief and sadness; we share it, feeling the same; the death of a combatant is a feat and sacrifice for the common good; she is rewarded with the glory of the deceased and care / love (!) for those involved; responding to this love and care, you need to give all the strength and energy to work in the rear, ensuring a future victory. In this exchange, built on the effect of grief, gratitude for love, pride for involvement, the tasks of warning, consoling, motivating the remaining relatives, symbolic rewarding and appropriating the charismatic victim of a combatant are provided simultaneously.

Such a text may have been subsequently published in a newspaper, placed in a museum, and repeatedly cited, thus strengthening the cultural memory of the war.

The military labour of this period, described in such a way, brings us back to the aforemen-

tioned tension between the front and the homeland. This tension requires precision and concreteness regarding spatial relations (the distance from the borders of the homeland increases as later, advancing forward, the army liberates inch by inch the territory taken by the enemy) and the quality of the carrying out of military duty (effectively, with results, with little blood shed):

10 November 1941, Valentina Panfilova to her mother.

Greetings, dear Manutochka, Galushki, Vissa, Zhenia, and mama. Greetings to you, and to my friends on the front. Mama! I visited my father on the front lines today. He has lost weight, but is well. I was there just at the end of the battle; I spoke to him – you know that he doesn't have time to write to you.

Upon entering into the battle, the division father commands defeated three German divisions, and did not retreat a single step. The captive Germans say that father's division 'spread itself thin over a great distance, and yet we

ould not find a single vulnerable spot to attack, because they fought like lions'. Additionally, we have a new weapon unknown to the Germans – one that destroys everything, living and dead, in its path, in a surrounding area of one kilometre. There is no defence against this weapon. The captive Germans call it a machine from Hell, and do everything in their power to find it – but this search has so far proven fruitless for them. One captive officer said: 'before I die, at least show me this hellish machine that so mercilessly decimates us'. In general, things are going well on the front. The Germans fear the oncoming frost, and some of them don't even have overcoats.

Well, farewell. Don't worry about us. Read the newspapers and write to us more often. Say hello to grandmother and Iuliia Mikhailovna, and to all our friends. Our warmest kisses,  
Valia, Papa (Ushakin et al. 2016: 53)

Work performed well is rewarded – and the war is no exception.

The particular ideological quality of the war, which is portrayed in the cultural sphere as a fight for liberation, is reflected in the practice of issuing symbolic rewards. Pitirim Sorokin (Sorokin 2006: 290) has pointed out the social dimension of such a reward, since it contains within it the potential for a social movement that can mobilize both political elites and the masses of the people. Jünger (Jünger 2000: 3) placed the symbolism of this act within a framework of total mobilization, within which the distinctions between war and peace are singularly and heroically effaced. Not only the work of the army, but also the national defence, requires an extreme commitment from all, one of which only war heroes and the labourers of the homeland are capable.

22<sup>nd</sup> November 1942. Sergeant B. Anarbaev to the members of the Karl Marx agricultural artillery of the Bazar-Korgon region, Jalal-Abad province.

My dear compatriots!

I want to inform you of my success in fighting these evil spirits. I have already destroyed 75 German fascist soldiers and officers.

The Soviet government has greatly valued my military accomplishments. I have received the Order of the Red Star. The honour is great, but so is the responsibility. I will answer this honour and care I have received from my homeland with an even more zealous destruction of the hated enemy.

Carrying out the orders of the homeland, we tirelessly and mercilessly engage and defeat the cursed Germans. Every day, snipers, gunners, mortar gunners and soldiers remove from the field of battle and kill dozens and hundreds of Hitler's soldiers. We see this sacred, purifying work as aid that we give to the fighters in the south, who defend Stalingrad and the Caucasus. Engaging in a socialist competition, the soldiers of the Red Army and its commanders improve every day the number of their kills in destroying the Hitlerites. The snipers alone in my division have killed six hundred German soldiers and officers since the beginning of the war.

I ask you, my dear compatriots, not to fall behind

in this competition. Complete your agricultural labour as if you were on the front, fulfil your duty to the government in advance of your deadlines. Give your country and the Red Army more bread, meat, vegetables, and cotton.

Let the solidarity between the front and the homeland grow – it is the foundation of our victory over our foes. The Red Army will carry out the will of the Soviet people. The Germans will be decimated, and fascism will be destroyed forever...

Sergeant Baidiur Anarbaev, recipient of the Order

The Newspaper *Soviet Kyrgyzstan*, 22 November 1942 (Ushakin et al. 2016: 60)

In this letter, the soldier refers to his military feats as a socialist competition, which, just like the labour of peacetime, has its own accomplishments, measured in the number of enemies killed. His effectiveness is measured by this number, which is rewarded with an Order and the concomitant monetary award. This met-

aphor of military work as a socialist competition establishes a parallel between those on the front lines and those on the home front and mobilizes the civilian population towards undertakings of a comparable scale to those on the front.

Does the nature of military work change over time? A comparison of the relatively minor Soviet-Afghan war with that of the Great Patriotic War reveals, through an examination of letters from participants in the Soviet-Afghan war, that the everyday particularities of military work change minimally. It is significant, however, that these letters do not draw upon the symbolic dimension of war as an event of national scope. There is no trace of the idea of a homeland and its borders.

Excerpt from a letter by Vladimir Il'ich Korablin, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1988:

I am alive and well; we live as before. We have changed our position and come closer to the mountains. Our regiment has been joined by howitzer artillery, a tank brigade, and the installations Grad and Hurricane. They shoot at the mountains day and night, clearing a path for

us. At the foot of the mountains, there are impassable jungles. The paths through the mountains are full of traps. Our enemies, the *spirits*<sup>5</sup>, have 20 tank guns, so they are very dangerous. Our artillery recently destroyed one of their checkpoints in the woods. Then they got angry, and started such a shootout, causing explosions within a radius of twenty meters [...]. Several times, the *spirits* picked up our communication frequencies, and we were forced to change them.

(Nizhegorodskii arkhiv Komiteta soldatskikh materei)<sup>6</sup>

The letter is largely descriptive, devoid of exhortations, evocations of victory, and curses rained down upon the enemy. They describe the daily routines of military acts. The unifying framework of these events remains hidden, while the tactical

goals of defeating the provisional enemy are foregrounded.

Another example of this is offered by a letter from the First Chechen war, a letter from Andrei Vladimirovich Nikonov, dated December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1995:

So, what can I tell you about Chechnya? I don't want to frighten you, so I'll only tell you a little. Don't believe those who tell you the war in Chechnya is over. On the contrary, it is just beginning. There are calls to arms day and night. It can happen at the slightest firing of a gun, and here they shoot day and night. Recently, they wounded two of our men and killed one. This happened during the day. Four Chechen snipers climbed trees, and nobody saw them. We didn't even hear when they shot our men like dogs. We only saw them fall, bleeding. It can't be described with words – it has to be seen. Good young men die here, who are sorely missed back home. At only nineteen, they have seen death, felt fear, seen a sea of blood; at only nineteen, they have experienced everything in their life.

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<sup>5</sup> The slang word *spirits* (in Russian *du-khi*) is a derivative of *dushman*, which means *the enemy* in the Pashto language.

<sup>6</sup> The letters quoted here and below are taken from the website of the Nizhnii Novgorod Regional Committee of Soldiers' Mothers.

And they will dream of what they have seen for a long time after they leave the army. Those who survive this war are strong and hardy. And God forbid that someone back home should reproach me. I will, quite literally, tear him to pieces.

(Nizhegorodskii arkhiv  
Komiteta soldatskikh ma-  
terei)

The experience in Chechnya reveals another important aspect of this *work* – the ability to survive. Those who survive will become stronger than those who have not experienced war. A masculine brotherhood unites those who survive, while opposing those who would dare reproach them for their participation in the war. The battlefield forges new forms of masculinity and solidarity, which form a new source of symbolism and meaning for military actions and campaigns in the second half of the twentieth century, as if avenging a fallen comrade could replace the defence of the homeland as a personal motivation.

March 1988, Salim Gatulin  
to Gennadii Skvortsov.

Hello, Gena,

My letter will probably surprise you, but I felt I had to write to you, since I know that you were Valerka's closest friend. However hard it is to write these lines, the past cannot be undone, and Valerka is no longer with us. It is so absurd how he died – for nothing. And right before being sent back home, too! How it all happened [...] during the first week of our operation, we killed more than thirty spirits, but this streak of luck ran out. Il'dar Akhmedshin's group had only gone eight kilometres away from the command post when they were ambushed. Two armoured personnel carriers fired at once, three were killed immediately, and many more wounded. This was very close to the woods. Il'dar was also gravely wounded, and the command fell to Valerka. He led the men in a heated battle that lasted nearly three hours, and they were assaulted on every side. Support from the air and artillery was barely permitted, since during this time the commanders were trying to come to a

peaceful arrangement with the spirits, and from the command post we saw our APCs<sup>7</sup> on fire. Then, when another regiment arrived to help, the sight that met them was horrifying. They pulled out the group, and helicopters arrived to collect the dead and wounded. A bullet had grazed Valerka's head, he wanted to stay, but the medic insisted that he be sent to the hospital. He got into the same helicopter as the dead bodies, Kost'ia was with him, as well as the translator and three other wounded soldiers. I accompanied him all the way to the helicopter, put him in there, and it took off. I turned around and headed toward the command post. Suddenly, I hear an explosion behind me. I turned around: the helicopter, having flown 500 meters or so, fell to the ground. We ran toward it. Valerka was still alive, but it was a horrifying sight. He never regained consciousness. That's how it happened – senselessly, so senselessly.

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<sup>7</sup> APC is an acronym for *Armoured Personnel Carrier*.

I'm sorry, it is difficult to write. My soul is heavy from this war, but I think that I will at least have the chance to avenge him... (Ushakin et al. 2016: 100–101)

The main difference in these letters from Afghanistan or Chechnya is the transformation of the discourse of military work, now devoid of pathos and heroism. In these letters, there are no more exaltations or exhortations to victory at any price, no patriotic slogans, no proud praise of the bravery and fortitude of *our* people on the front. This *weakening* of the machinery of propaganda in turn leads to a great variety of discourses within these letters from the front, although they nonetheless retain traces of ideology, which is expressed in the terms of *international duty* or the Christian archetype of *helping those in need*. In the twenty letters from Chechnya, examined through the lens of narratological analysis, there is a number of distinct narrative styles used to carry on communication with the combatants' relatives back home. First and foremost, these styles are defined by the lack of a *personal narration of the war itself*, which has been eliminated. The letter becomes a precious link

that connects its author to his home and his former social sphere. He does not want to, or cannot, talk about the war – likely because to do so means to externalize his own fears. Questions addressed to friends and relatives, reminiscences about events back home, fill these letters and create a bridge between the combatant's pre-war life and his potential return home, full of new life experiences.

Another distinct feature of these letters is that of describing the war as an experience of *work*. The substance of these letters is the writer's relationships with his superiors and equals, the day-to-day life on the front and its everyday routines, observations of military tasks and their difficulties. These letters are, for the most part, factual and informative. Narratives of the war appear to account for the various positions of the combatants in the hierarchy of the military, and consequently their *experience and achievements* at work. In these cases, the writer emphasizes instances of heroism and bravery displayed by individuals in battle, as a result of which they have advanced in rank or been rewarded by the state. But they also contain a more prosaic aspect that focuses on the logistics of professional promotion.

Another way in which the war might be narrated in these letters is as a *sequence of episodes of military actions and events in the daily life of the front* (facts regarding whether anyone was wounded, the killing of enemy soldiers, confirmations of the deaths of comrades, enemies, or civilians, captivity). These letters attain a certain universal quality in their narrative structure and descriptions of the sequence of events (beginning, middle, and end).

Finally, the war can serve as the *justification for a self-reflexive narrative* on military affairs, that functions as a combatant's way of understanding himself and others in war. War here functions as a valuable learning experience because it places the combatant on the line between life and death.

## Conclusion

This article has examined a fairly narrow range of topics – military labour, military professionalism, the ethos of military labour – in a far from comprehensive selection of letters. To cover such a broad time period is ambitious. Significantly, the genre of military epistles itself seems to be becoming obsolete: there is practically no more mass-



practice related to the institution of military mail, although military conflicts, large and small, are ineradicable. Communication formats have changed, and the genre of letters is changing at the same time. In this sense, the potential object of study – letters from the front – is finite. It is determined by the timeframe of this particular genre and preservation, as well as the availability of the letter itself.

We have considered the letter as an egodocument and evidence of an era setting the discursive reading framework. Although we tried to limit the research focus to the topic of military labour, we should recognize the artificiality of such a selection or the impossibility of separating this topic from other discursive themes. This is primarily due to the fact that the letter has a contractual nature of *writing and receiving an answer*, that is, its intersubjective basis involves a specific addressee, a possible broad scene of legitimate readers, unofficial censors and many others. Therefore, the selection of letters on the topic of military labour, professionalism and military ethos contains dual optics: a message to a loved one with an eye on the ideological conventions of the era. In the sample considered here, the formulas of

belonging to a social class structure are found and then significantly disappear. The early twentieth century sees phrasing such as ‘I have the honour to call up for the service of the theatre of war’ (Ushakin et al. 2016: 34).

, in which the military ethos of the owner of honour and the concept of service are combined. The word *honour* in the subsequent historical periods is already deprived of its individual meaning, it is about the honour of groups and identification with the group.

The letter from the front as an egodocument must be seen as an ideologically stimulated practice of an active social actor, which is especially vividly illustrated by the Soviet period of the times of the Great Patriotic War. The intonations of official discourse are infused into the style of writing to relatives, but the reverse is also true: official discourse acquires vitality and incarnation through names and biographical practices. Obviously, this is how the Soviet man’s sense of self arises, about which Jochen Hellbeck, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Yuri Slezkine and many others have written. As a result, this Soviet cultural practice was implemented in all its stages – the processes of writing a letter, its reading (perhaps out loud, among friends and comrades),

and possibly of being printed in a newspaper.

And yet, the description of military work in a letter from the front can be, first of all, informative, subject to scrutiny – as is the case of the letters falling into enemy hands, secondly, can be motivated according to the military ethos. The discursive polarization of the front and the homeland, united in the tense expectation of victory and return, gives meaning to military labour, requires its intensity, and legitimizes the sacrifices made.

Thus, we can conclude that in these letters dating from the latter half of the Soviet era, military work is presented overwhelmingly as service, and uses

terminology associated with service. It is something one must be prepared for, something one must carry out, something one must *attend to*. And while, due partially to censorship, letter-writers during the Second World War used these letters not only as a connection to their family and home, but also as a sort of public tribunal from which they could declaim slogans and curse the common enemy, the combatants of the Afghan and Chechen wars have left such tribunals behind. The war is laid bare by them as an experience of problem-solving and of survival.

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