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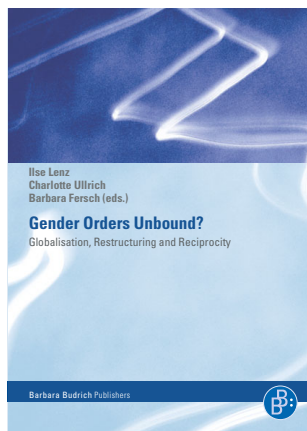
Soldiers' Mothers Fighting the Military Patriarchy: Re-invention of Responsible Activist Motherhood for Human Rights' Struggle

The aim of this article is to conceptualise the cognitive work of the Soldiers' Mothers Organisations in Russia.¹ I see civil non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements as epistemic communities that organise themselves through solidarity ties based on common cause and a common interpretation of social reality. This study focuses on field research carried out in the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers Organisation, though data from the cluster of Soldiers' Mothers Organisations throughout Russia is also used. In this paper I show how in its cognitive work Soldiers Mothers Organisations combine human rights frames with traditional Russian-Soviet gender symbolism. In the public realm, this organisation presents the fight for the human rights of drafted soldiers as a matter of maternal duty, rights and entitlement. The Soldiers' Mothers Organisation shapes its identity itself through the mission of responsible motherhood, which it sees as representative of the mothers' interests and political claims.

A microanalysis of the cognitive work of the Soldiers' Mothers demonstrates how civic culture functions and transforms in contemporary Russia. I claim that democratic values and institutions have not simply been imposed on Russian political culture, and are thus badly suited to it. Such an imposition would not be possible without changes in discourse accommodating these 'innovations' to the belief-systems of the receiving society.

I start with a short overview of the activities carried out by the Russian Soldiers' Mothers Organisations. Then I describe the framing that they produce in their cognitive work. I concentrate mainly on the self-identity. This frame reveals a combination of views that could be seen as incompatible, though they peacefully co-exist in the discourse of the organisations, and help to legitimise the human rights agenda of the Soldiers' Mothers vis-à-vis the state and the broader public.

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1. Soldiers Mothers' mobilisation²

1.1 Political opportunities

Currently, the United People's Party of Soldiers Mothers is being organised in Russia. However, the movement has a history of more than 15 years. Soldiers' Mothers Organisations emerged during the course of mass democratic mobilisation in the Soviet Union of the late 1980s.³ Public discontent with the conditions of compulsory military service, changes in political opportunities, and certain tragic events resulted in the establishment of civil organisations that defended the human rights of draftees.⁴

According to the 1993 Russian constitution, military service is a civic obligation for all male Russian citizens. Every man in good health between the age of 18 and 27 must serve two or three years (in the Navy) in the Russian armed forces. Local military commissariats hold the draft twice a year – in spring and in autumn. According to the law on military service, there are three reasons, which can rescind compulsory military service: poor health, family hardship (when a young man is the only breadwinner for an elderly single parent who is pensioner or when he is a father with a child under three years old), and conscientious objection. Students at state universities also have the right to defer military service.

Since the end of the 1980s, the problems of compulsory military service have been expounded in the public. Issues concerning the lack of material provision, the poor health conditions of young soldiers, hazing and bullying has constantly been the focus of public criticism. Reports on mass escapes from military service and desertion have featured regularly in the media. Since Vladimir Putin became president, military reform began to gain speed though it is obviously still insufficient. Two of the main issues discussed in military reform are the alternative service law (adopted in 2000) and projects to professionalise the Russian armed forces. Civil-military relations

2 The article is based on field research on the Soldiers' Mothers organisation in St. Petersburg. However, the text presents a broader picture of the Russian Soldiers Mothers' movement which utilises multiple data: media sources, movement documents, interviews with leaders and activists, and observational field notes taken regularly from September 1994 to June 2003.

3 During the protest cycle of perestroika, hundreds of initiatives emerged all over Russia dealing with ecological, cultural, political, ethnic, women's issues. Through the course of the wave of mobilisation they soon became politicised. For an overview, see Duka et al 1995: 83–99, Butterfield and Sedaitis 1991, Ortung 1995.

4 For the in-depth discussion of the main factors for the Soldiers' Mothers mobilization, see Caiazza 2002.

reform presumes the reinforcement of civil control over the military service of those drafted into the Russian army. Civil control has to be implemented by active civil organisations, such as Soldiers' Mothers' Organisations.

Before the late 1980s the Soviet Army was a hermetic social institution hardly accessible to public observation, debate and control. Indeed, very little reliable information filtered through to the mass media. Official discourse was deaf and blind to the everyday problems of Soviet servicemen. Yet knowledge of poor conditions and criticism of the military was widespread in the population. Stories about the rituals and practices of compulsory military service circulated in popular folklore, through horizontal informal networks. These stories contributed to the world of masculine culture, an exclusive homosocial realm. People came to know about violations of law and human rights in the army largely through popular folklore and the personal stories of servicemen, which they shared with friends and relatives.

Having always been “a state within the state,” the military developed its own exclusive culture with its own game rules. This culture was sustainable and resistant to change even when Russian society began to undergo rapid structural transformation. When considering the situation in the Russian Army in 1994, the leader of the Soldiers' Mothers Organisation in St. Petersburg noted: “Society is changing and developing a culture of human rights and democratic values, while the army is still behind. It is still a totalitarian institution.”⁵

However, during the course of the liberal reforms of perestroika the situation started to change. Political and ideological opportunities for open debates and civic activism emerged. The state of affairs in the Soviet army began to be discussed in public after an ideological demilitarisation was initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev that emphasised human values (1986–1987), brought about the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, and saw the rise of public condemnation of the political adventurousness of the Afghan War (1989). In the political climate of glasnost, the liberalised media was especially efficient in opening a discourse on the army. In the mass circulation literary monthly *Yunost* ('Youth'), the talented writer Yurii Polyakov published his novel *One Hundred Days Before the Order*, which discussed the humiliating everyday practices in the army and provoked a strong public response. It is worth mentioning that the letters the readers of the journal wrote to the editorial board and individual journalists – some of them published inside the monthly under a special rubric – were often not from the servicemen them-

5 Interview with the leader of the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers Organisation March 8, 1994.

selves but from their parents. Not only did journalists themselves initiate, but they also opened up the discussion to intra-military critics as well as to the victims of human rights violations in the army and the relatives of the latter. This media campaign became the context for the establishment of the charity foundation Mother's Right (*Pravo materii*) in Moscow in 1990.⁶

The change in the military code gave momentum to civil criticism of the military. When the regulations for military draft deferral were changed in 1988 and university students mobilised, the protests of the population ceased to be a mere grumbling. It was at this time (in April 1988) that the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (*Komitet Soldatskikh Materei*) was organised in Moscow with Maria Kirbasova – the mother of a draftee – as the head of the organisation.

One tragic event provided an impetus for intensified public discussion and anti-military mobilisation. In February 1987, the young soldier Arturas Sakalauskas was arrested in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and charged with the shooting of three senior soldiers and desertion. He was later examined by medical experts and put into mental hospital. This legal case was widely discussed in the mass media: local TV and radio news as well as newspapers thoroughly commented on the course of the trial. It was soon revealed that the military had attempted to conceal the real substance of the case. The true story emerged as follows: While escorting a long-distance train transfer, Sakalauskas had been continuously tortured and raped by three other soldiers. As a result he shot them in self-defence. The investigation of this particular case brought out evidence proving that the abuse and humiliation of conscripts by the senior soldiers was a common practice in the Soviet army. It was known by the term commonly referred to as *dedovshchina*⁷. Thus, *dedovshchina* became the object of public criticism when it was clearly exposed for what it really

6 Interview with Veronika Martchenko, leader of the civil organisation Mother's Right.

7 *Dedovshchina* as a specific target of criticism was discussed as a systemic feature of the Soviet military culture – the set of patriarchal informal practices performed in the collective of servicemen and characterised by discrimination against the first year conscripts (*salagi*) by the senior servicemen (*dedy, stariki*). In bureaucratic language these practices are called “out-of-statute relations,” which means that they contradict the Statute on Military Service. For many years, *dedovshchina* was considered to be an inevitable part of the internal ethos of the patriarchal social organisation of compulsory military service in the Soviet Army. It served as a set of initiating rituals thought necessary to achieve true manhood (Meshcherkina 1996). When it became obvious that such ethos in the extreme drives young men to suicide, mental illness and physical disease, crime and disability, the protest against this patriarchal military culture began to grow in public.

was. The mass media launched a campaign unmasking the brutal practices of the Soviet army.

1.2 The evolution of the Soldiers' Mothers' agenda

Gradually, a general criticism of the Russian-Soviet armed forces developed amongst the public. At the time, the Soviet army was mainly criticised on three issues: *dedovshchina* violations of the law during the annual drafts, and the assignment of the military to tasks that were not part of their legitimate field of activity.

Throughout the course of the discussion, the idea of civic control of the military service as guarantee for the “normal” functioning of the army collectives was formulated. In order to fight the military patriarchy, the first Committees of Soldiers' Mothers were formed in the spring of 1988, at the peak of the democratic mobilisation. These organisations formed the *All-Russian Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers* which now claims to have approximately 300 branches across the Russian state and more than 2500 activists.⁸ In several cases the establishment of the Committees was supported or even initiated by reform-oriented elements in the military. In this way “good patriarchs” wanted to fight “bad ones” and make them more civilised. The constituency of such non-governmental organisations was mainly parents and relatives of the servicemen, but it was not restricted to them. Journalists, politicians and the democratically-oriented military were counted among the activists. However, civil initiatives presented themselves as mothers' organisations. Most often they were called *Mother's Right* or *Committees of Soldiers' Mothers*. These initiatives were usually registered according to the law on voluntary associations as charity or human rights organisations. Although the members of the groups were both men and women, the name chosen for the human rights organisations referred to the symbolism of motherhood.

The goal of the Soldiers' Mothers was “to defend the rights of those due to be conscripted into the military, of military servicemen and members of their families.”⁹ In following this aim, the parents' committees established regular contacts with military garrisons and local military commissariats in order to oversee the process of military conscription. Their offices were often located in the local military headquarters. Hence, according to many observers, such organisations ran the risk of becoming “pocket structures” of the regional military commissariats. Civil structures were once again under the threat of absorption by military-state institutions.

8 Interview with Valentina Melnikova (*Guardian*, February 3, 2001).

9 Extract from the statute of the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers Organisation.

1.3 Organisational split and the radicalisation of goals

During the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the army was widely used to intervene in internal political conflicts in Georgia, Lithuania, Osetiya, and, later in Russia per se. At this time, the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers began to undergo rapid organisational and ideological changes. An organisational split eventually occurred within the recently established civil initiatives: some groups remained the "right hand" of the military, while others started independent anti-military campaigns and formed new independent organisations with disruptive strategies that demanded radical military reform. Local political opportunity structures, the amount of resources available, as well as the commitment of members (leaders and volunteers), influenced the diverse development of the Soldiers' Mothers in different regions of Russia. The most radical groups were organised in the two biggest cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in the Don region, close to the Chechen border. They demanded total deconstruction of the Russian military and followed pacifist ideology. As long as the reforms in the army are not carried out, Soldiers' Mothers Organisations argued, mothers should do their best to prevent young men – their sons – going into the military. Institutional distrust and a readiness to oppose institutional pressures were expressed in this position.

The argument of the radical part of the movement can be summarised as follows:

You cannot influence and control the military when you work in a team with them. It is necessary to oppose them openly, declaring the ideology of human rights and the defence of your sons. It is us who must save our future – our sons – from the war and the military [...]. First we worked as a human rights organisation which co-operated with all branches of power. But later we realised that we had to be the leaders not the assistants to the authorities.¹⁰

Along with organisational changes came changes in the goals of the Soldiers' Mothers' Organisations – they became broader and more radical. Their major claim became the demand for profound military reforms in the Russian army.

1.4 The first Chechen war and the second mobilisation

The military invasion of Chechnya in December 1994 mobilised the Soldiers' Mothers' movement all over Russia. Dozens of new organisations were registered. New items on the NGO agenda were formulated and new forms of collective action practised. Public anti-military protest at the start of the first

Chechen war was not solid at all. Only three factions in the State Duma protested against it – the Choice of Russia, the Russian Communist Party, and the Women of Russia. Despite the fact that the Russian population as a whole did not support the first Chechen war this anti-war lobby, which worked mainly in Parliament, was unsuccessful. Only the Communists and the Soldiers' Mothers came out into the streets protesting against the war in Chechnya. They organised regular pickets and demonstrations, which nonetheless failed to provoke mass mobilisation.

During the Chechen war, with its massive but silenced losses, the Russian military faced new problems. The number of conscientious objectors increased. Dismissals and exemptions from the army due to conscience also became more frequent. Local military commissariats did not fulfil conscription plans. Most of the refusals to submit to military service, however, were not public: the majority of young men tried to escape from military duties by using the private channels of their social networks and individual strategies which enabled them to legally postpone the draft. Instead of reforming the army, in the mid-1990s the Ministry of Defence was inclined to introduce a more rigid version of the law on military conscription, which was then discussed in the State Duma and in the mass media. Amendments allowing the deferral of military service were questioned. This did not cause social unrest because the resourceful part of population managed to escape military service, and those without the necessary resources still considered military service to be their civic entitlement and part of the institutionalised life-course of a man. In spite of the lack of mass support, Soldiers' Mothers continued their activities by co-operating with other human rights groups on a new agenda and the groups started networking. A co-ordinating process and joint actions amongst the Soldiers' Mothers from different cities of Russia took place. They organised workshops, conferences and seminars focusing their attention on legal education and juridical assistance for those who turned to them for help. After the mid-1990s, public-consciousness-raising, targeted specifically at the families of young conscripts, became the central feature of their activities. There was growing attention from the mass media both inside and outside the country.

Simultaneously, a radicalisation of the movement's ideology was taking root. Pacifism became the prevailing ideology in the radical branch of the movement. Their slogans included political anti-regime demands. An expanding repertoire of protest included street picketing, rallies and peace marches to military conflict zones. International contacts were established.

During the first Chechen war (1994–1996) the St. Petersburg Soldiers'

¹⁰ Interview conducted with Ella Polyakova, March 8, 1994.

Mothers arranged anti-military rallies and picketing in the centre of St. Petersburg. These demonstrations were, however, quite small and not many people joined the street protest. Soldiers' Mothers organised visits of mothers to see the conditions of Russian troops in Chechnya: they demanded for deserters not to be subjected to a military tribunal. They wrote anti-war appeals to the international and domestic political actors, such as the United Nations, the President of Russia, and the President of the United States, exposing violations of human rights in Chechnya and in the Russian army in general. These actions had only a symbolic effect.

The movement's organisations differed in their ideology and repertoire of protest. The Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg, for example, emphasised legal ways of avoiding military service and civic education. Since 1994 they have been active in initiating legal cases against the regional military prosecutor. They also recommend that mothers hide deserters (*runaways – begunki*, as they prefer to call them) before the start of any official investigation. The radical activists of Soldiers' Mothers Organisations attempted to convince parents to hide their sons from the military as long as military conflicts had not ceased and army reform had not been carried out. They argued: "If the army is dangerous to the lives and the health of our sons, we have to hide them from the military service in all possible ways." On the telephone they advised mothers who called for urgent advice: "Do not let your son go into the army. Just hide him. And send the military away – they can do nothing to you. Mothers cannot tolerate organised murder. Mothers take their sons from the army and do not give them back to the people of the military committees."¹¹

The core slogans of the Soldiers' Mothers during the first Chechen war were:

Return our soldiers from the trenches immediately! / Do not send our sons to slaughter! / Residents of the blockaded Leningrad are against blockading and bombing the residents of Grozny! / Soldiers and officers! Don't follow the orders of military criminals! / Stop the genocide – the extinction of the courageous Chechen people by fascist methods!

1.5 Institutionalisation and its outcomes

It is difficult to assess the public influence of any social movement. In response to Soldiers' Mothers' activities the military and the state utilised diverse, largely permissive, strategies. The initial reaction of the authorities to-

¹¹ Field notes of observations carried out in the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers Organisation, November 1995 and June 2003.

wards civil initiatives was one of neglect and silencing (Voronkov 1996: 132–36). Later, under international pressure, the authorities pretended to take into account certain demands made by the international community and human rights organisations. It is impossible to conceive of the Chechen war currently without taking into account the main civil actor – the voice of the Russian Soldiers' Mothers Organisations. Thus if the movement did not succeed in politics, it succeeded in disseminating human rights ideology as well as in pushing forward military reform. The influence of the movement was reinforced by its international reputation and by the fact that it had access to the international media and the European Union peace committees. International informational and financial support prevented the Russian authorities from following their usual strategy of "closing their eyes" or neglecting the movement's activities.

After the official end of the first Chechen war in September 1996 the impetus for the movement declined. Among the regular activities of the Soldiers' Mothers are legal education, representing the conscripts' interests in court, and specific human rights campaigns together with other civil initiatives. Currently, they are accepted as a part of the civil society in Russian society. The Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committees has won several international awards, including the Right Livelihood Award, known as the Alternative Nobel Prize. Currently the Union is in the process of forming the political party *United People's Party of Soldiers Mothers'*. The Union of Soldiers' Mothers is among the best known civil initiatives in the country. The popularity of the organisation is due to various reasons. In order to better understand its appeal we have to focus on its cognitive work.

2. On cognitive work

In my perspective, social movements and civil organisations are rational actors involved in cognitive work. Cognitive work is implemented for the purposes of consensus mobilisation inside the movement and mobilisation of potential supporters. In the course of cognitive work a non-governmental organisation constructs diverse schemes of interpretation addressed to its adherents and to the broader public. These schemes are called frames and the activities of frame construction are referred to, in social movement literature, as framing. Civic initiative can represent itself in different fashions. One way of self-presentation is a collective action performance produced by a civic group. Another way of making itself visible and legitimate is through the symbolism of its emblems and rituals. Yet another direct opportunity is to formulate its

ideological stand through official documents and in the public media. Mainly, the images of an organisation are formed with the help of mediators – journalists and public speakers.

Cognitive work, mediated by speakers, makes the organisation visible in the symbolic world of meanings and interpretations, which is shared by the public, and involves a continuing negotiation with popular beliefs and state-sponsored ideologies. This is so because in its attempt to obtain political and social influence, namely, in its mobilising efforts, the civil initiative has to construct a self-image that evokes a positive response in the public and cannot be totally neglected by the state. A movement therefore cannot establish itself if its frames are not aligned with popular belief-system regulating social action.

Researchers have identified several aspects of framing activities in social movements (Snow et al. 1986, Snow et al. 1988). The core is formed by the identity frame, which includes an array of sub-frames: the diagnostic, the prognostic, the strategic, and the self-identity frame. The first defines, among other things, the social problem, which the movement addresses and for which it names the main culprits responsible for the current unsatisfactory state of affairs. The prognostic frame lays out both an optimistic scenario of a desirable future achieved in case the organisation succeeds, as well as a tragic version if the organisation has no opportunity to carry out its mission. The strategic frame defines and justifies the plausible repertoire of activities, the appropriate means for goal achievement.

The self-identity frame – the most important frame here – is constructed as the self-definition of the organisation. It is revealed in self-presentations of the organisation to the broader public, within the sector of non-governmental organisations, and within the close circle of believers, participants and supporters. Inclusive and exclusive discursive strategies are used in the cognitive work. One aspect is the positioning of the represented group in historical time, that is, *vis-à-vis* the quasi-linear historicity of the past, present and future. Another aspect involves placing the group in the sector of voluntary organisations, and building up boundaries and links between the group and its allies and foes on the domestic and international political scene. This is done at the level of symbolism and ideology, as well as at the level of action. The civil initiative appeals to possible ideological predecessors who could be personified – prophets, teachers, martyrs, heroes – or organisational structures that have followed similar purposes within different historical contexts. The organisation looks for the genealogical continuity and historical rootedness of its cause in civic mythology.

3. The Soldiers Mothers' self-identity frame

The main question here is the framing configuration of the Soldiers' Mothers Organisations. Its construction appears to be suitable for mobilisation purposes and can efficiently resonate with the master image of femininity that resounds through the Russian discourse.

The self-identity frame is a combination of two powerful major concepts. One is the liberal human rights frame while the other is the responsible motherhood frame.¹² Self-naming, emblems and rituals, the rhetoric of public presentations, and the symbolism of the premises where the organisation operates contain references to these concepts. The object of the field study, the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers, serves as an example of this framing.

3.1 Human rights frame

The major frame on which these civil organisations ground their self-representations is the ideology of human rights. As declared in the statutes, the goals of the Soldiers' Mothers Organisations are: "to defend the rights of the young of legal age [the age of conscription], of the military servicemen and members of their families." (Statute of St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers Organisation). The very fact that such a civil initiative is legally registered can be interpreted as a recognition of the ongoing violation of human rights in the Soviet army. It can also be seen as an attempt to establish civic control over the military patriarchy. The purpose of the Soldiers' Mothers is to introduce this worldview to the ex-Soviet citizenry, which is not knowledgeable about their legal rights and the ways to defend them. Ex-Soviets are seen by Soldiers' Mothers' leaders as subjects of the state who must learn how to act as free individuals and true citizens in a democratic society. In order to achieve this goal, organisations carry out educational activities. Thus, for example, the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers run the so-called Human Rights School, a series of regular sessions aimed at intensive conscious-raising and legal advice for clients. The visitors of organisation (family members of the conscripts or future draftees themselves) have to attend at least one session. The didactic style of the speech uttered by the leader of organisation in the beginning of the session is one of exhortation and admonition. Repeated continuously to the audience in the room decorated by pacifist slogans, religious pictures and icons, this speech also could be likened to a public sermon where the leader is a female priest, an educator, an instructor and a missionary. The mission is to teach the audience the basics of the concept of human rights.

¹² In certain cases, pacifist ideology can be identified as the third frame.

The text of the introductory speech contains multiple references to the liberal ideology of human rights with its focus on individual responsibility and necessary legal education.¹³ Experts explain that the family is the main agent to defend the human rights of youth. In cases where a young man of call-up age does not have a family or cannot rely upon the help of experts, a civil organisation takes on the responsibility of representing his interests. The leader starts the session with introducing the organisation:

We are an organisation that protects human rights, not a committee. Our general aim is to promote the formation of a civil society and state ruled by law in Russia. [...]. We came here to work together. We are not going to just do things for you. It is your personal responsibility – the responsibility of your family – to defend your rights. You have to help yourself to defend your own inalienable rights. Do you know what rights can be called inalienable? They are the right to live, to be healthy and to equal protection under the law. You can read it in the Declaration of Human Rights, which is signed by Russia, and in the Constitution of the Russian Federation. [...] You have to follow the law. The authorities are fakes, they are not going to defend your rights. Therefore, you have to defend them yourself. If you do not defend your rights yourself, you become criminals, you violate the Constitution yourself. [...] You have to know the law and defend your civil rights against those who want to violate them – the authorities, especially the military authorities. They can cheat ignorant people, and threaten them, and blackmail them. We teach you to use the law against the officials who do not want to follow it. It is difficult, but you will learn.¹⁴

Soldiers' Mothers developed a procedure of human rights' protection, which they teach in the Human Rights' School. It includes a sequence of legal actions the person has to undertake in order to achieve his or her goal. Experts from Soldiers' Mothers Organisations name bureaucratic instances and the forms of applications, and give examples of the proper reactions on behalf of the citizens to the responses of bureaucrats. Voluntary instructors explain the technique to each visitor. "It is the same tactics that dissidents had elaborated and used in their activities during Soviet totalitarianism," observed the leader of the St. Petersburg group Ella Polyakova.¹⁵ She refers directly to the book of the Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovski,¹⁶ who vividly described the strategies of the defence of human rights on the basis of his own experience.

13 According to my research the introductory speech is regularly repeated for the newcomers.

14 The transcript is that of the session on January 7, 1994. The same phrasing was used in later sessions, including those that took place in June of 2003.

15 From the interview carried out on March 8, 1994.

16 Vladimir Bukovski, "I vozrashaetsia veter ..." – *Pisma russkogo puteshestvennika*. ("And Wind Returns ..." – Letters of the Russian traveler) Moskva: Demokraticheskaya Rossia, 1990.

The rhetoric of this speech is orienting the audience on legal procedures and competent self-help in securing their civil rights. However, the state and the civil society are positioned as antagonists. Such an approach is typical of the liberal concept of civil society and is quite new to those Russian citizens whose socialisation took place during the system of paternalistic welfare and who expect the state to be the main provider as well as the main culprit. The rhetoric targets the largest part of the audience – mothers and other relatives representing the parental generation of post-Soviet citizens.

3.2 The Responsible Motherhood frame

The second constitutive part of the self-identity frame produced by the Soldiers' Mothers is that of responsible motherhood. The symbolism of the organisation signifies the standpoint of its adherents and gives a key to its interpretation. The reference to the symbolism of motherhood is indicative. Why does the group use this label? Why are human rights represented as the right of a mother to exercise control over the military? Such a frame appeals, we believe, to the symbolism relevant to the Russian gender belief system.

In explaining the strategy of self-naming one informer observed: "Such name [Soldiers' Mothers Organisation] is meaningful for people. It sounds better than any other, and it is the basic truth – mothers are responsible for their sons and for life in general."¹⁷ The frame resonance is the strategy of consensus mobilisation, developed by the civil initiative in its cognitive work (Snow et al. 1986). This means that the group deliberately appeals to the imagery of a *mother* to legitimise its activities and to attract supporters. The symbolism of motherhood is presented as the justification for the protection of the son's rights and implies a reference to charity – to the non-profit activities of the organisation and non-commercial motivation of its members. Thus, we consider the naming of the group to be one of mobilisation strategies, appealing to the popular belief-system according to which "the basic truth of the Mothers' destiny" is to give birth to a human being and to preserve human life.

The model of responsible motherhood is at the core of the femininity construction of contemporary Russian gender culture. It is based on three ideological pillars: (1) a *Christian understanding of femininity*, (2) a *Soviet understanding of femininity and motherhood*, and (3) a *liberalised understanding of motherhood*.

17 Interview with Elena Vileneskaya, the co-coordinator of the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers Organisation, carried out in April, 1994.

The Christian understanding of femininity

The concept of responsible motherhood rests on a powerful ideological pillar, which has grown increasingly attractive in the current Russian cultural landscape – Christian religious beliefs. The essential destiny of a woman to be a mother is one of the central ideas of Christianity. It is symbolised by the powerful imagery of the Mother of God. Thus, the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers see the Mother of God as its patron saint. It justifies its ideology through an appeal to traditional Christian gender values. A Christian justification serves as the common ground for bridging the human rights frame and mothers' rights frame based on an essentialist interpretation of womanhood. The members openly declare their religious views and sentiments although it is difficult to say what type of Christians they are because they are both adherents of different churches as well as atheists. However, in the early 1990s the premises of the organisation were consecrated by the priests of four different congregations: Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox, and American Protestant. Members of the group claim that their efforts became more efficient after the consecration due to the favour of their patron saint.¹⁸ The decoration of the place is saturated with religious symbolism and produces a shrine effect. Sometimes candles burn in the room where the parents and future soldiers are advised and trained. The walls are decorated with the self-made and printed copies of icons of the Mother of God and saints, the texts of the prayers – a mother's prayer and poetry devoted to the suffering of the mothers of the soldiers – *The Cry of the Mother*. A prayer group reads a common prayer before the session of the Human Rights School. Visitors are invited to join the common prayer after the end of the consultation. Since the late 1990s, the Catholic St. Francis of Assisi has become one of the central pacifist religious symbols for St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers.

The emblem of the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers can be described as a female hand holding a burning candle from which the rays spread to form a cross. According to the interpretation of the leader, "the ideology of the organisation is expressed in this symbolics – we want to save the life [of humankind, of the Russian population, of our sons]. The symbol also has a religious meaning; you see the sun rays in the form of a cross as an allusion to Christianity." A strong belief in the integrity of the values of Christianity, human rights and motherhood is typical of the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers.

¹⁸ The leaders of St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers are baptised Catholics and claim, in informal talks, that Russian Orthodoxy discredited itself through its long history of cooperation with the repressive Soviet state.

The Soviet understanding of femininity

Responsible motherhood as a core concept of the movement's master frame also resonates with the Soviet construction of femininity: the working mother (Caiazza 2002, Rotkirch and Temkina 1997, Zdravomyslova 1999). The Soviet understanding of femininity focuses on a woman's reproductive capacity, which constituted the basis for women's civil entitlements. Soviet gender construction is supported by a number of targeted social benefits and ideological campaigns, which produced a particular understanding of parenthood that was based on responsible motherhood. During the Soviet period, the sphere of social motherhood – as seen in the domains of welfare, health, education and reproduction, etc. – became the ground for women's public participation. Soldiers are basically not viewed as adult human beings but as children who cannot stand up for their rights themselves. The arguments of the Soldiers' Mothers are often related to the health, care, material well-being and the life security of conscripts. The struggle for the sons is seen as a struggle for the extended reproductive rights of the women.

It corresponds to the Soviet gender symbolism that responsible motherhood is constructed not only as an individual right but also as a civic duty. The Soviet gender ideology is vibrantly analysed by Amy Caiazza in her discussion of the key concept of radical motherhood which legitimised the activities of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers headed by Maria Kirbasova at the end of the 1980s (Caiazza 2002: 124–26). The ideology of motherhood as a woman's biological imperative and civic obligation formed the basis for the human rights ideology of the group. The biologically determined public value of motherhood logically includes the mother's right to defend her offspring and to represent its interest in public. Imagery of the Mother as the representative of the child's interest and its security was confirmed by gendered Soviet citizenship.

In most cases, organisations aimed at the protection of the human rights of conscripts do not appeal to the gender-neutral category of *parents' rights*. In my view, this feature fits in not only with the Christian but also the Soviet gender ideology. The Soviet understanding of parenthood gave priority to women as natural mothers.¹⁹

In Soviet ideology, motherhood was still looked upon as the fundamental destiny of a woman based on her ability for reproduction. Such an ideology

¹⁹ Until 1993, Russian family law addressed all social benefits affiliated to parenthood exclusively to mothers. The taking for granted of a mother's parental right is revealed in divorce trials.

prescribes the main responsibility for life as such to women. "Neither tanks nor generals can stop a woman who once gave birth to her son and who now wants to save his life." (Polyakova and Belyakov 1995: 4). This understanding of motherhood as the core of true Soviet femininity is rooted in the culture of gender polarity, and in the belief that men and women are essentially different and thus have different destinies and duties. The Soviet ideology of double standards resonated with the traditional gender belief system.

Gender polarity has been an important feature of the Soviet gender order. It is an essential feature of state-sponsored gender ideology. Just as men served the state through the military and mobilising for work, women served by bearing children and working for the state. The Soviet gendered polar citizenry confirmed the idea of a natural gender order. The mainstream image of femininity was a working mother based on the idea of a separate sphere of motherhood responsibility. The civic obligations of motherhood were not limited to reproduction in the narrow sense of the word. They extended far beyond bearing, giving birth, and nursing children. The ideal Soviet woman is not frail or helpless; she is presented as strong, vigorous, athletic, able to implement hard work and capable of self-sacrifice.

Responsible motherhood is a role-model that assumes control over the safety of children and a readiness for self-sacrifice for the lives and well being of children in circumstances when the children are not able to defend their own rights themselves. The idea of a mother's sacrifice justifies the risks undertaken by mothers in their anti-military protest. The writings of Soldiers' Mothers activists confirm this thesis. A mother's right is also seen as a gendered human right, the right to educate and to protect. This right is presented as the civic moral duty of responsible motherhood.

One of the activists clarifies this position with the following words addressed to the audience of mothers (in: Vilenskaya and Polyakova 1998: 30):

You are a human being, your child is a human being, you are the mother of a human being. Then do what a true mother has to do! This is not only your right but also your duty. [...] One mother is confused by the fact that her son was drafted into the Army although he was sick, another one is surprised by the fact that her sick son has not been demobilised. [...] It is the duty of a mother to know her own rights as well as the rights of her child when he is not of age, and to defend the rights of her child as well. It is her duty then to know the law on conscription and the law on military service as well as the list of the diseases that allow him to avoid or defer military service. It is your duty to make them [the military authorities] respect you and the law.

Two features of mothers' rights follow from these assumptions: They are seen as natural and they are presented as normal, sacred and virtuous. It is con-

sidered to be sacrilegious and uncivilised to violate them. The widely shared concept of responsible motherhood is aimed at the legitimisation of the Soldiers' Mothers' fight against the military patriarchy.

Liberalised responsible motherhood

This representation of a mother's entitlement is combined with the understanding of mothers' rights as human rights and civic duties, as discussed above. The traditional concept of motherhood is framed in the organisation's rhetoric as an ideological basis for the struggle for human rights. According to the concept of *liberalised* responsible motherhood, the Russian state responsible for repressive conscription cannot act as a guarantor of social rights. According to this frame, responsible mothers should defend conscripts' rights and should not allow this function to be transferred to state institutions, which they no longer trust. To embody the role of responsible motherhood a woman should be civilised and enlightened. Liberalised responsible motherhood presumes that mothers should become knowledgeable about ideology and legislation on human rights protection. The activists like to quote the contemporary Russian writer Viktor Erofeev: "It is high time to return to our mothers their rights [to take care of their children]. It is you who have these rights, dear women."

4. Education of the ignorant

The frame of responsible motherhood is complemented by the way the Soldiers' Mothers organisation sees its clients. They are largely perceived as being without resources, as ignorant objects of state manipulation and abuse who demonstrate their lack of necessary knowledge of the concepts of human rights and technology of their protection. The organisation presents itself as the agent of human rights education. The study of the St. Petersburg group shows that the overwhelming majority of the visitors and adherents of the Soldiers' Mothers seek help because they do not have sufficient economic, cultural and social resources to solve their problems privately.²⁰ The majority of future soldiers and their family members leave the organisation when they find a solution to their problems, although some of them stay on as volunteers.

²⁰ In everyday practice, people attempt to escape the dangers of compulsory military service by getting (buying) medical certificates and attempting to find a safe place away from military service. In 1994–1995, the average price of a medical certificate that guarantees exemption from military service was between \$1000 and \$2000 depending on the region and the parties involved in the deal. By 2002, the price in St. Petersburg had risen to \$5000.

The free-rider problem and the expectations of clients vis-à-vis the patron are well known issues to the activists and volunteers.

One of the leaders observed with regret: "Many come here just to use us. They come to us only to demand, they think that it is our duty to provide them with resources. They feel offended if we do not work for them in the way the old Communist party organisations did. They have no idea about the voluntary work or the self-help principle. They want things to be done for them, they like to be patronised. They just use us and leave."²¹

With reference to the free-rider issue and lack of public participation, the speaker of the All-Russian Union of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers claimed:

Unfortunately, there is no proper public opinion in Russia similar to what you find in the European countries. Thirteen years of our activities show that unfortunately Russian people are somehow very childish. [...] Psychologists call such an attitude 'infantile'. If things do not happen to them personally, if it is not in their own direct personal interest, they try to distance themselves from the problem, they construct a boundary as if saying: I see nothing, I hear nothing, it's not my business. And only if something happens to them personally do they start to move, to make some attempt, to be indignant and to shout: "We sent our son there, for God's sake, and he is sick, they do not treat him medically, they do not do a proper examination, they are ruining him!" You know, I look at my compatriots with bitterness. I look with bitterness at all this situation. It is because I do not respect my compatriots [...].²²

The leaders and the volunteers of the organisation contrast themselves with the objects of their mothering. They participate in public activities because they belong to a different civic culture – a culture of democratic citizenship, oriented towards human rights. They are not only personally interested in the protection of the human rights in the army, but quite often their activism is ideologically motivated. Thus Ella Polyakova, one of the leaders of the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers, has had experience of working in a number of democratic organisations during perestroika, including the Leningrad Popular Front and the Human Rights Committee in the city council. There she became involved in the protection of soldiers' rights and discovered that the action of the official structures in this sphere was not efficient at all. To answer the unmet needs of the victims of the human rights violations, she started a new self-help organisation. I interviewed a former lawyer of the organisation who is one of those who do not seem to have any personal interest in the is-

21 Interview with Elena Vilenskaya, the coordinator of the St. Petersburg Soldiers' Mothers Organisation (April 1994).

22 Interview with Valentina Melnikova (March 2002).

issues of the Soldiers' Mothers Organisation. According to his statement, he came to work there "because of a religious commitment." He said that almost all of the male friends of his youth were now ruined people (either alcoholics or criminals). But since he has survived and has become rather successful he sees it as his duty to help other young people find their way. The leaders and the volunteers position themselves as "true citizens" who have to teach the people to follow their example.

5. Conclusion

The more than fifteen years of the Soldiers' Mothers movement in contemporary Russia signifies the emergence of the civil society. Its mobilisation potential is based on the ideology of human rights, an essentialist interpretation of motherhood, Christian beliefs, and the traditions of Soviet responsible motherhood. Contemporary Russian civic organisations are involved in intensive cognitive work, which aims at the development of a democratic civic culture that will not contradict dominant popular beliefs. By making themselves public and vocal, non-governmental structures develop frames that are aimed at legitimisation and mobilisation. The identity frame, and the presentation of self-identity in particular, are an important aspect of this cognitive work. Research on the Russian Soldiers' Mothers Organisations helped us to reconstruct the certain kind of double belief (*dvoeverie*) in the frames developed by the movement – a combination of the traditional concept of motherhood and human rights ideology. The combination implies a specific interpretation of human rights and the civic duties of a mother, a mixture of traditional gender ideas, vague longings for Christian morality, and an acceptance of the human rights ideology. The duties of responsible civilised motherhood are interpreted as the protection of the human rights, and as the right to defend sons from the abuse of the military patriarchy. The Russian state has always supported the ideology of a mother's civic duty. The Soldiers' Mothers reinterpret these duties into the civil rights of liberalised responsible motherhood. The interpretation of these rights as citizens' entitlements and duties is based on the ideology of traditional femininity and human rights.

Soldiers' Mothers are effective in their cognitive work, which helps them in self-legitimation efforts. The army and the state cannot effectively oppose this movement because of their ideological affinity to it. The army and the Soldiers' Mothers share the same understanding of gender and motherhood. The latter fight the army through the same discursive means which the army appeals to – the patriarchal understanding of maternal duties. The construc-

tion of a Russian mother cherished by the patriarchy itself is reformulated and used against the army. Thus, the re-formulation of the concept of mothers' rights and entitlements and the re-addressing of their agenda make the Soldiers' Mothers one of the leading forces in civil society.

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