

Warrior, Philosopher, Child: Who are the Heroes of the Chechen Wars?

Historians distinguish between the two Chechen wars, first in 1994-1995 under Yeltsin's presidency, and second in 1999-2000, when Vladimir Putin became the Prime Minister of Russia and was mainly responsible for military decision-making. The first one was the result of the Soviet Union dissolution, when Chechnya wanted to assert its independence on the Russian Federation. The second one started with the invasion of Dagestan by Shamil Basaev's terrorist groups, and bombings in Moscow, Volgograd and the Dagestani town Buynaksk. It remains unclear what exactly led to a Russian massive air-campaign over Chechnya in 1999. Putin declared the authority of Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov and his parliament illegitimate, and Russians started a land invasion. In May 2000, Putin established direct rule of Chechnya. However, guerrilla war never stopped. Up to now there has been local ongoing low-level insurgency against Ramzan Kadyrov, the Head of the Chechen Republic.

Who was drafted to fight in the Chechen Wars? Mainly, young people from neighbouring regions of Russia, who were poorly trained. Russian troops suffered severe losses, since they were ill-prepared. Because of lack of training and experience, Russian forces often attacked random positions, causing enormous casualties among the Chechen and Russian civilian population. The Russian-Chechen Friendship Society set their estimate of the total death toll in two wars at about 150,000 to 200,000 civilians¹.

If the first war received extensive international coverage, the second got considerably

¹ Wikipedia. Retrieved March 30, 2017 from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Chechen_War.

less public attention. Federal authorities limited the access of reporters to Chechnya and have been using repressive tactics with independent journalists.

Veterans, who share their experiences in autobiographical and semi-fictional narratives², introduce their subjectivised view on the events. They do not separate or juxtapose the Chechen Wars, as do historians. The narratives do not so much concentrate on depicting the history of war, battlefield fighting and the hardships, which come along with military service, but rather on the main characters' feelings and perceptions. As one of the Russian scholars stated, the specific feature of the Russian war prose at the turn of the twenty-first century is the new literary anthropology – that of "anti-historical images of a man at war." (Kukulin, 324)

Response to confrontation with death constitutes the essence of narratives. They are "self-therapeutic" ways to stabilize mind in life-threatening circumstances. The narrator's consciousness acquires special significance, while plot development is retarded. The Chechen war prose is focused on unnaturalness of war and marginalization of veterans in the Russian society. Even though there are patriotic heroes who can be described as warriors, love for their homeland manifests itself in loyalty to comrades-in-arms, not the nation or state. They are in opposition to the command staff and the government. In the novel by Vyacheslav Mironov "I Was in That War: Chechnya – 95"³ the narrator gives an ironic commentary about the arrival of

² The selected material for this presentation was published on the ArtofWar.ru web portal and in Russian leading literary journals: "Znamya", "Novy mir", "Octyabr", "Nash sovremennik", "Kontinent", "Druzhba narodov" in 1994–2009.

³ Vyacheslav Mironov (Vyacheslav Lazarev) was born in 1966 in Kemerovo. For a year, he studied in the Mari Polytechnic Institute. In 1988 he graduated from I.T. Peresyarkin Kemerovo Higher Military Command Communications School. He took part in military campaigns in Baku, Tskhinvali, Kutaisi (the Georgian-Ossetian conflict), Transdnistria, Chechnya (1995). He was wounded twice and suffered multiple contusions. He was awarded the Order of Courage. He was a winner of the "Tenyota" on-line literary contest (2000) and awarded the prize of V.P. Astafyev Fund (2003). The novel "I Was in That War: Chechnya-95" was published in 2007 by the

new commanders and generals from Moscow:

New commanders arrived. Many of them tried to take command of the operations but all their efforts failed. They quickly calmed down and started drinking and writing laudatory odes on their military skills. It's a story as old as time. Everything is repeated. A couple of times some generals came from Moscow together with correspondents. They posed against a background of the Palace and gave interviews inside the building. They asked the wounded soldiers about something. Someone tried to approach me, but I turned my back on him and told him to get lost⁴.

Responsibility for "their own people" features a true hero, even if it contradicts the orders received from the superiors. Mironov portrays one of the battalion commanders as a warrior, who was not afraid of bullets, never avoided talking to soldiers and did not get promotion for years, because he had no other ambition but to save their lives caught against their will in a meat grinder of war. Confrontation with authorities is seen as an act of heroism, while fighting with the Chechens is a tragic necessity, where both sides are victimized and fated to engage in action.

Exacerbated tension between combatants and capital commanders results in disinterest of the former to pro-war rhetoric. Ilya Anpilogov⁵, in his diary, emphasizes that the official

"Eksmo" publishing house, but it was first published in the Internet on the ArtOfWar portal http://artofwar.ru/m/mironow_w_n/text_0010.shtml (author's note)

⁴ All the translations from Russian are mine. (author's note)

⁵ Ilya Anpilogov was born in 1982 in Murmanskaya Oblast to the family of white collar workers. Since 1994 he has been living in the town of Shchigry (Kurskaya Oblast, Russia), where in 1999 he finished secondary school. While serving in the army, he took part in the counter-terrorism operation on the territory of the North Caucasus Military District. He studied journalism at the correspondence department of the Kursk State University. Since 2002 he has been a regular contributor to "Komsomolskaya Pravda" and "Kursky Vestnik" newspapers and the "Kontinent" journal. His literary diary "The Lessons of Army and War, or Chronicle of Daily Routines of the Chechen War: From a Conscript Soldier's Diary" was first published in 2002 in "Kontinent" (no. 114). (author's note)

ideology is useless in patriotic education and that the Chechens and Russians have more in common than difference because they all dream of peace:

However, another record was finally and irrevocably recognized as a 'gold & platinum album' of the outpost: a young and sad voice with a Chechen accent was singing about the war he was sick and tired of his dead comrades, debased homeland and his longing for peaceful life. It was so congenial to our feelings that we did not care about periodic references to "Russian pigs" in those songs. We all understand: they have the same propaganda elsewhere, not only in Chechnya. It isn't actually very effective here. Once our battalion commander brought a TV set and video player, summoned us all to the tent and started showing a trophy film with the scenes of prisoners' execution by the "Chekhs". It was certainly terrible, and many of us threw up at the sight, but "our noble wrath" did not "seethe like waves" because we all understood that the scenes in the film would not have changed if we were in their shoes. (Anpilogov, 170)

This capability of servicemen to go beyond antagonism instigated by propaganda is something unique. Even though singular examples of compassion toward the opposite side of the war conflict can be found in Soviet literature about the Second World War and the Afghan War, the awareness of futility of propaganda is new and undermines the very notion of a war hero. A militant is considered brave and experienced only in battles with a strong enemy. When there is no clear idea of hostile *otherness*, there are no warriors, no heroes.

A prolonged exposure to extreme conditions causes the effect of insensibility and mental fatigue. The fear of spiritual atrophy becomes a distinguishing characteristic of the war narratives. For example, Artyom – the protagonist of Arkady Babchenko's⁶ novel "Alkhan-Yurt"–

⁶ Arkady Babchenko was born in 1977 in Moscow. In 1995 he was drafted to take part in the First Chechen War. After the war, he graduated from the Modern University for the Humanities. In 1999, joined the counter-terrorist operation as a contract sergeant. He is a journalist, writer and publisher of the magazine "Iskusstvo vojny. Tvorchestvo veteranov poslednih vojn (Art of War: Works by Veterans of the Last Wars)" He also works at the "Novaya Gazeta" newspaper. He was a winner of the Début Prize, got awards of the "Novy Mir" magazine (2006,

ruminates on soldiers' *philosophy*:

He once noticed it when he looked into the eyes of soldiers trembling on the armour. It struck him that those eyes did not focus on anything or try to locate individual elements in the environment – they just let everything pass through without filtering. An absolutely empty stare. And incredibly full at the same time – all the truths of the world can be read in the inward-looking eyes of soldiers. They've understood everything and everything is clear to them, but they don't give a damn, and this is scary. The "dead eyes of a philosopher" do not look outwards – they are just open, and the ultimate truth is pouring out of them. (Babchenko, 24)

Artyom had the "dead eyes of a philosopher" too: "He was not thinking. He had lately acquired that new ability – to stop thinking about anything." (Babchenko, 32)

From the memoirist's perspective, verbalization of Artyom's refusal to rationalize the tragic reality of war paradoxically turns out to be directly the opposite. This type of the narrator may be named the philosopher, because he is so much focused on reflection and thinking activity. He seeks to avoid indifference to life (in stronger terms, depression) by intense psychological analysis, even though this makes him experience continuous anguish. Narrating about forced mental retardation seems essential for the veteran to restore unity with himself, having faced horrors of war:

A dozen soldiers were in the midst of marshes – and the death was walking a kilometre away from them...At such moments, when houses are shattered to pieces, tumbling in tonnes of earth lifted into the air and leaving craters, each about the size of a small lake <...> – at such moments you acutely feel the weakness of the human body, with its brittle bones and soft flesh and their vulnerability to the metal. My God, all that hell is not to split the Earth in half – it is just to kill people! It turns out that I'm so weak; I cannot resist this avalanche that has easily scattered the whole village to pieces! I can be so easily killed! The thought

2008) and an English PEN-Club prize. He lives in Moscow. His novel "Alkhan-Yurt" was published in 2002 in the magazine "Novy Mir" (no. 2). (author's note)

leaves me speechless, almost paralysed... (Babchenko, 29-30)

The author's interpretation of war bears a resemblance with the phenomenological philosophy of E. Husserl, who understood consciousness as a constitutive flow of experiences. The constitution form is the phenomenological temporality – the unity of the past, future and present in a single intentional act of consciousness. The consciousness of 'I' possesses the surrounding world and itself through the constitution in the form of temporality. It seems, that consciousness as a constitutive flow of experiences becomes the only possible form of self-preservation for the philosopher-protagonist. His therapeutic writings transfer experiences from the external world onto his inner-self.

The story "Santucci" by Aleksander Karasyov⁷ is about a man who returned from war. He received his nickname, Santucci, while studying at the History Department of the University of Krasnodar. In wartime "he commanded a company, and now his life is prosaic, and he drinks," working as a security guard. Karasyov describes Santucci as a tired child, whose eyes are empty. (Karasyov, 55) One may see a new type of hero – not a prematurely aged young veteran, a representative of the lost generation, as portrayed by Erich Maria Remarque and Richard Aldington, but an exhausted little boy.

From psychoanalytical perspective⁸, the role of a child is inherent to consciousness of any person, and when it is necessary to make a decision, this role allows avoiding active actions

⁷ Aleksander Karasyov was born in 1971 in Krasnodar, Russia. He received degrees in history and law from the Kuban State University. He used to work as a mechanic, pump operator and a security guard, and served in the army. He is a veteran of the Chechen wars. Since 2003 he has been regularly published in the leading literary magazines. In 2008 "The Chechen Stories" by Aleksander Karasyov were awarded the Bunin Prize as "Discovery of the Year". He lives in Saint Petersburg. "The Chechen Stories" were first published in the literary magazine "Druzhba narodov". (author's note)

⁸ Eric Berne, *Games People Play*. Moscow: Eksmo, 2005

and taking a contemplative position, waiting until *adults handle it*. And this interpretation can be applicable to the Russian veterans. In the Chechen wars, the adults' role is played by military commanders. But their orders lack any moral or logical sense: to use rabbits in fire drills, to cleanse the area (Russian euphemism for killing *suspicious* civilians), to storm Grozny palace without reinforcements, etc. For the protagonist, childish behaviour becomes a strategy to escape the absurd reality.

In the novel "The Pathologies" by Zakhar Prilepin⁹, Yegor – the main protagonist – has a dream:

I dreamed about words. It seems they were: God holds the Earth like a thirsty child holds a cup of milk – with tenderness, with trepidation – but may drop it. (Prilepin, 295)

The non-canonical image of God as a child helps Yegor justify the violence of war. God cannot be held responsible for it because God is an innocent child. It echoes Nietzsche's Heraclitus who sees the world as the divine game of the child-God. Prilepin also compares fight shootings with the bang and rattle produced by a child with tablespoons in a pan:

The rhythm of the heart, the rhythm of perception, the rhythm of what is happening is similar to the rhythmic beating of a spoon, or a few spoons, placed in a pan by a child running around the apartment with the pan, eager to make as much noise as possible. (Prilepin, 275)

The simile serves to reduce the tension of the described events, to transform threatening

⁹ Zakhar Prilepin was born in 1975 in the village of Ilyinka (Ryazan Oblast, Russia) to the family of a teacher and a nurse. He sometimes used a pseudonym of Evgeny Lavlinsky. He started working at the age of 16. He received a degree in philology from the Nizhny Novgorod State University. He served as a squad leader in the OMON riot police and took part in the Chechen campaigns of 1996 and 1999. In 2003 his first works were published in the newspaper "Den' literatury". Works by Zakhar Prilepin were also published in such newspapers as "Literaturnaya gazeta" and "Limonka", as well as in the magazines "Sever", "Druzhba narodov", "Roman-gazeta", "Novy mir". His novel "The Pathologies" was published by the publishing house "Andreevsky Flag" in 2004. (author's note)

reality into a joyful game. Throughout the novel, Yegor reverts to childhood memories, which is nothing but a form of mental escapism. Childhood, as the world of harmony and beauty, is opposed to the horrors of war. Such emphasis on the child theme, when either a main protagonist identifies himself as a child, or war reality is represented as a playground with God as the key player, points to identity crisis. The impact of war on personality is traumatic and destructive. The "child-protagonist" is a tragic hero. He survives the war at the expense of unnatural "rejuvenation" of his consciousness to the level of child's ignorance and is not able to grow up in civilian life.

Chechen war veterans' narratives can be described as confessional, pain-alleviating, and, to some degree, self-healing. Human mind lives its own independent life and struggles to survive in the world deprived of humanity and reason. They demonstrate that individual voice cannot be displaced by propaganda messages, neither silenced or heroized. The writings bring evidence to the reader about the senselessness of a local war, the only result of which is traumatised personality, who needs long-term rehabilitation.

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