

## Memory and transmission of the Chechen wars Elements for a sociology of Russian veterans' memories

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*"What is a human being? If you take away the memory[...] it will just be a living organism, able or unable to do certain things, but it will no longer be a human being." (Nikolai, veteran of the second Chechen war, 07/12/19)*

### Introduction

On an evening in October 2019, I meet Kirill, a Russian veteran of the first Chechen war, initially met through a veterans' association in Moscow. He gives me an appointment at the McDonalds on Tverskaya street, close to the Red Square, where we drink a tea on the terrace despite the freezing drizzle. I introduce myself as a researcher of Russian origin from a Brussels university and tell him about my project to study the memory and transmission of the Chechen wars among Russian veterans. After a few jokes about my "enemy affiliation" as a resident of the city where NATO is headquartered, Kirill asks me to put him in touch with a Belgian association of World War II veterans and proposes to organize a joint Russian-Belgian commemoration event. All my attempts to go back to Chechnya will be vain; the conversation systematically deviates to the Second World War. When I ask him about his war experience, Kirill refuses to talk about it, addressing me to "heroes of Russia"<sup>1</sup> who fought in Chechnya, and who "have things to tell". He seems to be genuinely willing to help me, gives me several phone numbers and advice on how best to approach decorated veterans. At the end of the conversation, Kirill proudly offers me two tickets to attend the military parade organized on November 7 on Red Square for the 75th anniversary of the Moscow battle.

This meeting shows the central place that the memory of the Second World War (called the "Great Patriotic War") has in Russian society<sup>2</sup>. It also shows the predominance of an "official" commemorative memory, to the detriment of more private forms of transmission of veterans' experiences<sup>3</sup>. This transmission is all the more difficult for Russian veterans of the Chechen wars, as shown by Kirill's attempts to dodge the question and as confirmed by the scientific literature. While the latter has dealt with various political, social or psychological issues related to the war experience of Chechnya veterans or their return to civilian life (Le Huérou & Sieca-Kozłowski, 2010; Sieca-Kozłowski, 2013a, 2013b;

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<sup>1</sup> The highest honorary title in Russia (See всегерои.рф).

<sup>2</sup> On 24 June 2020, while public gatherings are still banned because of the coronavirus pandemic and Russia is registering thousands of new cases a day, 13,000 soldiers march through Red Square to celebrate 75 years of victory over Nazism.

<sup>3</sup> Russians speak little about their wartime experiences to their relatives (Nikolai 2016).

Lokshina, 2007, Nikolai, 2016; Nikolai & Kobylin, 2017; Danilova, 2007; Kulmala & Tarasenko, 2016; Colin Lebedev, 2013), veterans' war narratives or memories - as individual representations of the past, opposed to the politics of memory or public narratives (Lavabre 2007) - is still to be investigated.

This research follows works that study war 'from below', considering it as a series of social practices and using the classic tools of sociology (Colin Lebedev & Shukan 2018; Buton & Gayer, 2012, Bucaille, 2006). Following Cécile Jouhanneau (Jouhanneau 2016), we consider that war memories are always reconstructed through the present (Lavabre 1998) and that their expression depends on social and political conditions. This paper is thus an attempt to propose some avenues for developing a sociology of the memory of Russian veterans of Chechnya based on a first fieldwork.

The paper is based on two types of empirical material. First, I conducted about 15 in-depth interviews with Russian veterans of the Chechen wars from different ministries<sup>4</sup> between October and December 2019: military, police and special forces (*spetsnaz*). Among the latter, I spoke with members from OMON<sup>5</sup>, SOBR<sup>6</sup> (Ministry of the Interior), an elite anti-terrorist group of the FSB, and an elite unit of the Internal Forces (National Guard). I also completed this material thanks to the project 'Soviet & Post-Soviet Wars: an oral History Project', directed by Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, which aims to collect and make accessible the testimonies of veterans, reporters or other witnesses of Soviet and post-Soviet wars in order to contribute to a 'history from below' of these conflicts (Sieca-Kozłowski 2019). This project enabled me to consult the transcripts of interviews with veterans of the Chechen wars from the army (conscripts and officers) on the website of the *Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*<sup>7</sup>.

The confrontation with the empirical data first showed that there is no absolute taboo around these issues. While it was very difficult to convince the veterans to give us an interview (most said they had "nothing to talk about"), once the conversation started, most of them spoke openly. The memories of the war, more or less easily recounted, were expressed through various forms. A way of expressing a non-traumatic memory was, for example, to recount only the good memories or the little things of everyday life (*byt*) during the war. Some veterans recalled the salmon they ate in Chechnya, which they would never have tasted elsewhere, as a way, perhaps, of emphasising the singularity of their experience. Others recalled the landscapes or certain memorable encounters with the civilian population. The anecdotes were told in a humorous tone, praising the resourcefulness of the combatants despite the few means at their disposal. The humorous tone was a privileged means of distancing themselves from the events recounted. Furthermore, the interviews revealed a more or less significant gap between the veterans' accounts and the official memory of the Chechen wars. Some veterans expressed a very critical relationship towards the military or political authorities and distanced themselves from the public accounts of the Chechen wars.

The aim of this article is to understand these various modes of "emergence, evocation and formulation of memories" of war (Lavabre 2016). What are the factors that facilitate or prevent their expression? What leads some veterans to adopt a critical view of the official

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<sup>4</sup> During the second war, a significant number of police and special forces were sent to Chechnya to fulfil military objectives. This is, among other things, a political decision that goes hand in hand with the non-recognition of the Chechen conflicts as wars (Lokshina 2007; Daucé 2002).

<sup>5</sup> "Special Purpose Mobile Detachment, Ministry of the Interior, mobilised in law enforcement or counter-insurgency operations.

<sup>6</sup> "Special Rapid Reaction Detachment, Ministry of the Interior, specialised in hostage rescue and counter-terrorism.

<sup>7</sup> <https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/5856?lang=fr>

narratives of the Chechen wars or of the military institutions, while others conform their representations to them?

Elements of explanation will be proposed in three parts. First, I will explore the influence of the Russian political and social context, i.e. the official narratives and memorial policies. As Raphaëlle Branche writes about the French conscripts of the Algerian war, the *'memories of conscripts and what they can transmit to their relatives must be articulated with the socially dominant representations. Even if they are dissonant, these memories cannot be expressed without taking into account this overall national framework. They lean against it and therefore always contain it to a greater or lesser extent.'* (Branche, 2020: 19, personal translation from French). Second, I will present some elements on the role played by the environment and professional trajectories. Finally, I will look at the influence of 'intermediary groups' and 'affective communities' (Halbwachs 1997), including the family and various associations (veterans' associations, patriotic associations or informal meetings between 'brothers in arms').

### **Chechnya veterans and official narratives of war: between "heroic memory" and lack of recognition**

#### *The Great Patriotic War: an overwhelming model*

The difficulty to evoke memories for some of the veterans can be explained by the predominance of an official memory of the Second World War, with which the wars in Chechnya do not fit. According to Russian researchers Fedor Nikolai and Igor Kobylin, the memory of the Great Patriotic War has three main characteristics. First, it is a 'heroic' memory, centred on the great exploits and sacrifices of the Soviets. The notion of victory (*pobeda*) is also central to this memory, which is embodied in the numerous official celebrations. Finally, it is a 'cleaving' memory that produces an 'us' versus a 'them' by distinguishing a clearly identified foreign enemy and ideology to be fought (Nikolai & Kobylin 2017).

The interviewed veterans find it difficult to fit their experiences into this kind of narrative. Some do not consider the 'Chechen events' in which they took part to be 'wars', insisting on their 'local' dimension:

"I can't call the Chechen campaign a war. Because for me, when you fight against your own people, it's not a war. It's true that there were mercenaries, especially during the second campaign, but you're fighting on the territory of your country, with your own men. And so you can't feel pride in the fact that you are fighting against your own people[...]. it's a local conflict, even if I don't like that expression, it's not a war. [...]. And then, we mustn't forget that their officers have passed through our military institutes and academies. The leader of the republic [Dudaev] was an air force brigadier general, guys who had been in Afghanistan, officers" (Interview with a former member of OMON, 11/11/19).

Unlike in the Great Patriotic War, the issues and opponents in the Chechen campaigns are not clearly identified, as expressed by this police officer, which even admits to understanding the opponent's point of view:

"In my opinion, and this is how I was brought up, war is something grandiose, it's when there is a confrontation between at least two great powers.[...] Well, it depends on the type of war. In a civil war, there is an internal confrontation, that is to say that people divide, separate. While here, who divides, who separates? Here, some people made money on it, that's all. [...] Everyone went their own way, their own path. Some went for money, for others, it was revenge that was the driving force, they wanted to avenge their family, or whoever, in short... It's very difficult to explain.[...] Everything is mixed up in this story, there are so many elements. There's the whole historical heritage. There's also Comrade Stalin, who moved people under the sun in Magadan, they did it quickly, in three days they brought

them together and took everyone away<sup>8</sup>. Obviously there is resentment, I understand that too. "(Nikolai, veteran of the second war, 07/12/19).

Finally, unlike the memory of the Second World War, many experienced the First Chechen War as a lost war and a humiliation:

"There is resentment because we were abandoned, because the generals left and left the troops. The fact that we were chased away is also an abandonment. »

"Yes, psychologically it's difficult, when we were fired in the summer of 1996, it was very shameful. »

The veterans interviewed seem to have internalised this lack of recognition, considering that they did not do anything important compared to the veterans of the Second World War and that there is therefore no point in talking about their experience or commemorating the Chechen events. A feeling of inferiority or a posture of humility compared to the grandparents' exploits can be found even among former members of the elite forces or decorated veterans, as expressed by this former SOBR sniper:

"What our grandfathers did, what they carried on their shoulders for those four years, I didn't do anything, I'm a worm, it's totally on another level. What's there to be proud of, frankly? Everybody tells me, you were born at the wrong time.

- But you said that your grandfather didn't like to tell either...

- Yes, that's probably why I don't like it either. "(interview with Ivan, 8/12/19<sup>9</sup>)

This feeling of inferiority is amplified by the lack of recognition and support from the state.

#### *Official narratives on the Chechen wars*

These relatively recent conflicts (December 1994 - August 1996 and September 1999 - 2009)<sup>10</sup> are not officially recognised as wars. The first war have been labelled as an 'operation to restore constitutional order' and the second have been called an 'anti-terrorist operation'. The first war lead to very heavy losses on the Russian side and deeply marked Russian society, which for the first time in its history had access to images of war through independent media. It was experienced as a humiliation of the Russian army, which was strongly criticised for its obsolescence and incompetence (Daucé, 2001). The second war was characterised by a lockdown of information (Wilhelmsen, 2017) and by massive human rights violations committed by Russian troops (Gilligan, 2013). These wars cause deep trauma, first and foremost for the Chechen population but also for Russian soldiers. The disorders from which they continue to suffer on their return to civil life are referred to as the 'Chechen syndrome' (Le Huérou & Sieca-Kozłowski, 2010). In spite of this, these veterans receive almost no state support. The resumption of the war in 1999 played a central role in the constitution of a new 'military-patriotic' national discourse (Le Huérou & Sieca-Kozłowski, 2008: 15), which has restored the prestige of the army and asserted Russia's desire to regain great power status. However, Russian veterans of Chechnya continue to face a glaring lack of recognition (Merlin & Le Huérou 2012).

Some of the veterans regret that there is no specific official day of commemoration for the Chechen wars and feel humiliated by the amount of their pension, as this former member of OMON stated:

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<sup>8</sup> On the deportations of Chechens in the USSR, see Campana A., Dufaux G., Tournon S. (dir.), *Les déportations en héritage. Les peuples de Crimée et du Caucase, hier et aujourd'hui*, PUR, Rennes, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> See Ivan's profile below.

<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to date the end of the second war precisely as men continue to be sent to Chechnya after the official end of the anti-terrorist operation in 2009. See Merlin, 2010.

"2972 rubles (about 40 euros) is the amount a veteran who took part in combat actions all over Russia receives. Most say that this is a lack of respect [*izdevatel'stvo*]. It would have been better to pay nothing at all rather than such an amount.[ ]... This is important, some might have felt pride in receiving something. They kill you, make you bleed and then they abandon you in the end. You didn't do it because it was an order but because you followed your heart" (Oleg, veteran of the two wars, 11/11/19).

Some of the veterans also find it difficult to fit their personal experience into the official narrative of the two Chechen wars. This is echoed by the Demos Centre's study on police veterans of the Chechen wars, which describes them as unable to articulate the origins and course of the conflicts (Lokshina 2007: 39).

The veterans' discourse includes what could be described as a 'conspiracy' view of the origins of the conflict, where the Kremlin is said to be particularly interested in the war and to have hidden interests:

"Our generals were haggling, and our government was haggling, I'm more than sure. And they made money out of it." (Oleg, 11/11/19)

This view takes various forms and is supported by accounts of large quantities of weapons left by the Russian army in Chechnya to fuel the war or of secret negotiations by the central government with "Chechen terrorists". For example, several veterans report having seen or set up security "corridors" to evacuate terrorists. To support his view of a Kremlin that "controlled both sides", a former sniper also bitterly recounts having had Bassaev<sup>11</sup> in his sights and being ordered to put down his weapon as he was about to shoot him.

Regardless of the veracity of the facts, it can be assumed that, in the absence of recognition, such a vision gives the veterans a sense of control and attributes meaning to their experience. It therefore amplifies their feeling of having been used and fuels resentment towards the authorities:

"I understood that this war had a double bottom. You know when you start collecting documents and talking to the intelligence guys, the information comes, comes, comes, you understand that there are double or triple bottoms. You understand that you are just a pawn, thrown on the battlefield, whether you survive or not, we don't care" (Ivan, former SOBR, veteran of both wars, 8/12/19).

Veterans' representations bear the traces of the national political discourse, centred on a patriotism with a strong military component and a warrior heroism, themselves inherited from the Soviet period (Sapper 2008). However, veterans find themselves in a paradoxical situation. The army and war memory are valorised at an abstract level while their individual and collective experiences of war are not recognized. Certain elements of the official narratives of the Chechen wars are integrated by the veterans (such as the refusal to call them "wars"); however, this discrepancy produces at the same time a feeling of abandonment and bitterness, which may lead to the expression of critical relationships towards the political or military authority.

The macro level - the historical, political and social context - influences the expression of veterans' memories. However, the degree of identification with official narratives also depends on other factors. Like any social representation, representations of the past are embedded, at the micro and meso levels, into biographical trajectories and breaks, which themselves depend on the various socialisations of individuals. Among these, the professional environment seems to play a particularly important role in the framing and the expression of war memories.

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<sup>11</sup> Commander of a Chechen independence group that has claimed responsibility for numerous terrorist attacks.

## **Professional backgrounds and trajectories: from conformism to critical posture**

The second Chechen war mobilised a large number of police officers and members of the special forces. It is thus appropriate to take into account, in addition to the military institution, these very specific professional environments. As F. Buton and L. Gayer point out, the later are not reduced to an 'invariant institutional culture', but structure 'the field of possibilities, offering material or symbolic gratifications to the most conformists but also sanctioning 'deviant' behaviour' (Buton & Gayer, 2012, personal translation from French). It is therefore important to study how biographical trajectories intertwine with the various socialisations specific to these professional environments.

### *Loyalty to the institution and conformity*

When I meet Konstantin<sup>12</sup>, a decorated army officer and veteran of the first war, it comes as no surprise that his discourse conforms to official narratives, in which the preservation of the state is central. Often asked to speak about his experience in schools and accustomed to speak in public, he presents an exclusively positive vision of the role of the Russian army. Loyalty to the military institution is at the centre of his legitimisation narrative. This "professional" framework can be seen as depoliticising insofar as it prevents the elaboration of a broader critique of military and political authority. It is supported by the vision of a necessary division of labour, as also expressed by this OMON member:

"I took an oath. Thinking is the job of the leaders, if everyone started thinking about what they were doing, ... there would have been no victory in the Great Patriotic War, that's for sure. You have to follow orders and try to do your job" (Interview 11/11/2019).

The absence of doubt is seen as the core of the profession. When he witnessed atrocities committed against civilians, this police officer described his reaction:

"What did you feel at that moment? What did you do?

You can't do that. It's not normal. They are children. I was sitting in the back, we were in a column of cars, there was nothing you could do about it, we just kept going. Then we spoke to our commander, he said that all this would be taken into account, that it would not happen again.

- Did you have any doubts at that time about the rightness of what was being done? Did you have any doubts in general?

- Doubts about what?

- That something wrong was being done.

- No, I had no doubt. How could I have had any, it was my job" (Interview on 10/11/19).

Here we can see the ambivalence of the discourse: at the beginning of the extract, the policeman uses a moral register, he knows that something bad has been done, but at the same time he cannot admit the very fact of doubting.

These representations of the job also lead to avoiding certain subjects with colleagues, to avoid putting them in an uncomfortable situation:

"Even when we meet with people who are still serving today, we don't talk to them about it, we don't ask unnecessary questions. Because you know very well that they can't answer all the questions. Even if the person trusts you 100%, out of respect for him you don't ask him. Because you know that he will answer you. And then, it will make him uncomfortable. Why put him in an uncomfortable position? In Syria, everything is fine, that's enough. We have won, everything is fine. We are moving towards regularisation in the Donbass. From what I know, they are helping the Donbass in one way or another but how exactly I don't know. [...] I try not to watch television. Because there's nothing to watch. I'm not interested. There are goals I have to fulfil." (Grigori, former FSB spetsnaz, 29/10/19)

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<sup>12</sup> Interview on 23/10/2019.

This framework also leads Konstantin, like others, to reject the usefulness of any psychological rehabilitation programme, considering that post-traumatic stress only affects mentally weak or unprepared people, but not the professional military:

"At the military institute, I was taught to defend the country, to face the adversary. All the events I took part in, the command of the battalion, that's my job. All my life I have prepared myself for the fact that at some point I will have to take up arms and see death. To send other people to their deaths, my subordinates. What does rehabilitation mean? State aid, yes, but moral, psychological or whatever rehabilitation, no. Again, we are officers, this is our job." (Konstantin, 23/10/19).

In her work on the Russian state's management of psychological wartime suffering, Elisabeth Sieca-Kozlovski shows that the lack of care for Chechnya veterans is a function of the problems of dealing with psychological suffering in Russia in general and in the military world in particular (Sieca-Kozlowski 2012). The interview with the former chief psychologist of the OMON unit of a city of 20,000 inhabitants is quite emblematic of the relationship to psychology and post-traumatic stress in the Russian army and police. Having himself served in the OMON during the two wars, this psychologist states:

"In fact, as Professor T. [one of his psychology professors] told me, and this is also my personal opinion, with all due respect for psychology, I don't think we need psychologists [...]. We don't need them. There weren't any before, and there were less problems. I mean in terms of the more European conception of psychology. There, whatever happens, I go to the psychoanalyst. To a brainpathe [*mozgoprav*], as I call them. You have to decide for yourself, what you need. If it were like abroad, Russia would have gone crazy by now." (Oleg, 11/11/19)

The psychologist also claims that some former combatants use their status as Chechnya veterans to justify their alcoholism or involvement in criminal activities. He also explains that his job was primarily to recruit people with the right psychological profile to serve in the special forces and to assess the psychological state of OMON members rather than to look after their well-being. The Demos Centre's study on police officers returning from Chechnya confirms this particular orientation of police psychologists, showing that it is a factor that further amplifies the discrediting of psychology among veterans and their mistrust of mental health professionals (Lokshina 2007).

We can therefore think that these particular representations of their profession prevent some veterans from talking about painful episodes or episodes that do not conform to official narratives.

### *Professional trajectories and the development of a critical discourse*

Views on the importance of loyalty, honour and service to the homeland can also be accompanied by a highly critical view of military and political authority. It is for example the case of former members of the special forces who, unlike Konstantin, did not receive symbolic or material recognition from the state. Considering themselves to be a military elite, willing to make sacrifices through extraordinary physical and psychological preparation and extremely dangerous missions, some former Spetsnaz express strong resentment, linked to a feeling of abandonment and the conviction that their devotion to the motherland was exploited by their superiors and political leaders. The latter are portrayed as driven by purely financial or power-preservation interests, opposed to the purity of the commitment of the special forces.

During the interview<sup>13</sup>, Ivan repeatedly shows his disregard for money and says that he joined the special forces of the Ministry of the Interior "to prove himself" [*proverit' sebá*] : "you are young, strong, all doors are open to you and if they are closed, you open them!". He remained with the SOBR from 1994 to 2006 and carried out missions in Chechnya during the two conflicts. His accounts of the war are structured around the opposition between the men on the ground, the "guys full of ideals, fans"["*vse rebáta byli ideinye, fanaty*"], opposed to the "guys staying warm in their offices", the leaders who come and go, the politicians with obscure interests. The stories told serve as examples to support a critical view of the hierarchy, which he inscribes in the "eternal opposition" between the men in the field and the members of the "*štabniki*" [head quarters] that his grandfather, a veteran of the Great Patriotic War, also said he "hated". Unlike Konstantin, Ivan's professional career was filled by disillusionment and downgrades. For an operation where he captured a terrorist without any injuries, he received a decoration from Vladimir Rushailo, then Minister of the Interior (between 1999 and 2001), which Ivan was asked to 'return' five years later:

"The most serious thing is that we did this job, he [Rushailo] gave us allowances like a tsar taking his fur off his shoulders [*kak šubu s carskogo pleča*]. Five years later, Yeltsin left and they started to take away these allowances. Rushailo left, another minister arrived. I said to them: you didn't give it to us, what right do you have to take it away? And for fear of being fired, my hierarchy told me "you have to give it back". [...] It was not pleasant.

— How did they justify it?

— They just said that legally they had no right to give it to us. »

Even though Ivan does not openly complain about this situation, saying only that "it was not pleasant", one feels a bitterness despite his detached tone that contrasts with the account of his missions and their exceptional character. His resignation from the SOBR is also linked to a lack of recognition:

"I was the commander of a unit specialized in arresting high-risk criminals. A general came along and wanted our special unit to start picking up drunks on the street. I don't despise this activity at all, it's just not my job. »

Like other spetsnaz, the expression of his bitterness is also based on comparisons with the treatment of special forces in European countries or the United States:

"Guys from Germany had come, there if they capture one high-risk criminal every four years, or save one innocent life, they are considered to have made their money back. All the rest of the time they train, they are respected. Whereas we arrest them every day, and nothing. I received a proposal to protect a [private] person, I left. »

The spetsnaz deploy strategies to cope with this lack of recognition, which influence the form and content of the war narratives. Unlike Konstantin, Ivan does not directly recount his war exploits - they are tackled indirectly or were reported to me by others. His memories of the war do not follow the official storyline, but rather are expressed through anecdotes involving his comrades or emphasising the hidden interests of the political and military leaders (see above). The impression that emerges from our exchange is one of great humility and modesty, which Ivan assumes when he says he never talks about his war experiences:

"[I: ]Why don't you like to talk about it? Or don't talk about it?

- First of all, because modesty makes a person more beautiful [he laughs].

- But telling is not bragging...

- Well, it's still bragging. You see... what we did, you or someone else will say, that's cool, guys, hats off! But I compare myself with my grandfather, and I'm nothing at all. »

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<sup>13</sup> Interview on 8/12/19. All the following quotes from Ivan are taken from this interview.



He minimises the importance of his work, but also of the disillusionment and the lack of recognition he has faced (he repeats several times that "it's not serious", that he "didn't expect anything"), using a tone and a posture that could be described as cynical. In addition to giving a feeling of mastery, as mentioned above, such a posture creates the image of an alternative heroism, that of a kind of superhero in the shadows, not recognised at its true value. Moreover, Ivan's war narratives, like those of other veterans in need of recognition, are characterised by frequent use of humour, which becomes another means of distancing oneself from the events recounted. Not without provocation, this humour is sometimes very cynical:

"I don't really like to tell these things. I'm more... My commander tells me: write a book! But I like to tell things in a humorous way. I think you can [...]"

You know, we, the SOBR, its founding date is April 1<sup>st</sup>, the day of humour. We joke that even our birthday is a joke! [...]"

- [me:] Do you ever talk about these things?"

- Never.

- To no one?"

- No. With you, it's just because Antokha asked but I don't like these things. My children, if they hear something by chance at the table, I slap them on the ear. I understand that you need it for your work, but I think it's useless. [...] What I'm telling now, I've never told anyone. I like to tell funny, interesting things. A guy in Chechnya stepped on mine... [he tells a horrible story] . »

In the speeches of career soldiers, police officers or members of special forces, the silence about their war experiences is often justified by a desire to spare their relatives who, unlike them, are not prepared to be confronted with war. A policeman who took part in the second war admitted that he shared his experiences with his wife because she was in the same profession. He described himself as fortunate to have the support and understanding of his wife, which shows the importance of the family as another frame of remembrance.

### **Affective communities as frames of remembrance**

#### *Silence and transmission of war experience: product and issue of family relationships*

Raphaëlle Branche, in her study on families of French conscripts from the Algerian War, shows that the family becomes 'the first space for saying (or not) the experience' (Branche 2020: 9, personal translation from French). She observes a 'weak transmission' of the war experience of former French soldiers to their relatives and shows that far from being solely 'solitary', silences are 'familial' and function as modes of communication within families (*Ibid*:10).

In the same way, the silences of the Russian veterans of Chechnya seem to have been inherited from their parents or grandparents who fought in Soviet wars and who did not talk about their war experience. This silence adds to the exemplary and sacred image of the veteran of the Great Patriotic War, haloed by a glory that does not need to be spoken about and that imposes respect by its mere presence:

"My grandfather Mikhail was a valiant veteran of the Great Patriotic War [...] I saw him as an icon. [...] this image of a warrior was strongly imprinted in my memory, and was probably a determining factor in my choice of profession. We always tried to be like our grandfathers.[...] They never said anything about the war. I was particularly marked by my grandfather Mikhail, he was the most respected of all the brothers. He didn't need to speak, but everyone respected him. On the 9th of May feast, he would always arrive last, and none of his brothers would sit at the table before he would arrive, not to mention the women, everyone was waiting for Mikhail. "(Dimitri, veteran of the first war, 9/12/19).

If the Second World War gave rise to very few stories within families, the war in Afghanistan was even less reported, being a taboo within Soviet society (Borovik 2001):

"[me:] Did your father talk about Afghanistan?

- No.

- Did he talk about his work? Did you discuss the various conflicts?

No. Never. We never talked about these themes.[...] I don't even know how to say it. It was not done. [...] We lived a little differently in the USSR. Now we have democracy, transparency, etc. Before, we didn't know. The war in Afghanistan, someone was fighting there but who and how we didn't know. My father was coming back. We would ask him: what did you do there? He would answer: we were helping the diplomats. That's all he would say. What could we ask him? What we heard on TV? We didn't say much about it. So we didn't know what to ask in the end. Now you can find all the information on the internet. Before, the war was secret information or just inaccessible so we didn't look too hard."(Grigori, former FSB Spetsnaz, 29/10/19)

Family representations on the place of each family member influence the expression of war memories and reveal the specific relationship that veterans have with their relatives (Branche 2020: 17). The figure of the mother, which is very present in the narratives, does not, however, seem to encourage them to speak out. The image that emerges is that of a stoic woman, who worries silently without letting anything show:

"Can you imagine how worried my mother must have been? It's crazy, she didn't let anything show, I never even saw tears. Today I understand how difficult it was, how much she was worried inside, she didn't show anything but still, there were her sighs... I can imagine all the white hairs that all this brought her."(Former internal forces spetsnaz, 9/12/19).

Moreover, as Anna Colin Lebedev shows in a study devoted to the mothers of Russian soldiers, mothers can paradoxically play a privileged role in transmitting warrior patriotism, by '[emphasising] the importance of military service as an acquisition of a masculinity that they themselves do not feel capable of giving to their child' (Lebedev 2004, personal translation from French).

The father figure is relatively absent in the narratives. The only veteran who talked more about his father is Grigori, a former FSB spetsnaz who served in a unit led by his father. Grigori is well aware that this is a special situation and spontaneously draws attention to the ambivalence of this type of filiation:

"After I passed all the tests at the end of 1992, I started to serve. My father offered me to serve under him. But to serve under your father is not so obvious. A father who takes his son to war, in the end... It's not that easy. Can we say that it's an advantage? It's still a special kind of advantage!"(Grigori, 29/10/19).

The transmission of war experience can play a particular role in the father-son relationship, as is the case with Dimitri, a former helicopter pilot and veteran of the first war. Dimitri has an ambivalent relationship with his war experience. He had to deal with a very serious post-traumatic syndrome, which he says he was able to overcome thanks to his faith and the help of a priest. He rejects the life he led before he started his religious quest (which he describes as a "meaningless life", a life of "an animal"), and has a generally negative view of his war experience, which he rarely recalls. However, Dimitri sometimes puts his veteran status forward to instil "good values" in his 6-year-old son and "serve as an example". For example, he particularly insisted that his son stay with him during the interview (while he had asked his wife to go out). He is also very concerned about his child's sports education: at the presentations, Dimitri mentions that his son practices sambo (a Russian martial art). In the rest of the interview, he says:

"A boy should be raised as a warrior. That's how I try to raise my son.

[Me:] How would you react if your son went to war?

- I would support him and be proud. In my heart I hope that he will have to accomplish this sacred path"  
(Dimitri, 9/12/19).

These hopes for his son's future and the link that the war seems to establish between them can be seen in the light of Dimitri's involvement in 'patriotic education' activities, which also influence representations on the war and on the past.

### *Associations and informal groups as sources of meaning and recognition*

*"So, bro, let's have a smoke,  
Let them not understand us at the table,  
When we stand in silence for the third toast  
And drink a bitter one together. »*  
(Song "Bratan" by the group Golubye Berety<sup>14</sup>)

*« Ну что, братан, давай закурим,  
Пусть не поймут нас за столом,  
Когда мы в третий молча встанем  
И выпьем горькую вдвоём. »*  
(Голубые Береты, « Братан »)

We have seen how recognition or the lack of recognition influences veterans' war representations. In the absence of state recognition, veterans can find support within associations or informal groups of 'brothers in arms'.

Veterans are therefore willing to engage in patriotic education activities, which they see as a way to maintain a memory of their experience. Veterans of 'local conflicts' (Afghanistan and Chechnya) have been encouraged to take part in the various state patriotic education programmes<sup>15</sup> for Russian youth that were set up after Vladimir Putin came to power (Sieca-Kozłowski, 2010a).

Beyond the material advantages, this participation allows Chechen veterans to value their war experience and to inscribe it in an official patriotic narrative, alongside veterans of other wars. Moreover, these activities can have a real therapeutic effect, as shown by the testimony of Dimitri (profile above), who is very involved in the associative life of his small town in the oblast of Tver. With the help of a priest from a local parish, he founded an Orthodox association. One of its objectives is to organise sports events (mainly combat sports) and sports and military training camps 'to inculcate a military-patriotic spirit in young people':

"The boys have to get used to war. So that there is not so great a separation between civilian and military life. So that they are used to the conditions of war, so that they are not lost.[...]. The children like this atmosphere, find it amusing. Once, they even refused to be put in a bed, they preferred to sleep on boards." (Dimitri, 9/12/19).

Dimitri claims that, in addition to religion, these activities helped him to 'get back on track', overcome the after-effects of the war and give meaning to his life. This investment enabled him to articulate his war experience in a coherent manner with a 'staging of the self' (Bucaille 2006: 459), in line with a patriotic discourse on warrior heroism. This discourse justifies retrospectively his life choices so that the difficult return to civilian life does not produce a critical view of the lack of care from the state.

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<sup>14</sup> The 'Blue Berets' are the symbol of the Russian Para-Commandos (VDV). This rock band, formed in 1985, originally accompanied Soviet airborne troops during the war in Afghanistan, before becoming popular with the wider audience with songs on war themes.

<sup>15</sup> On patriotic education programmes, see Désert, 2013; Daucé et al.

However, some veterans express sometimes a very critical view of veterans' associations, which are perceived as 'pseudo-organisations' that pursue personal interests 'under the guise of their veteran status' (Sieca-Kozłowski, 2010b). In the absence of an official day of commemoration or a specific status for veterans of the Chechen wars, they organise meetings to 'remember together' (Nikolai, 07/12/19), to exchange with 'people who think like you' (Dimitri, 9/12/19), or simply to 'be together without talking to each other' (Ivan, 08/12/19). These meetings are often organised around symbolic places and dates of commemoration. The places used are above all cemeteries where veterans gather and talk in front of the graves of their former comrades, but also public squares with monuments, or usual meeting places for Russians (Red Square or Mount Poklonnaya in Moscow, meetings organised at the Black Sea). The dates of commemoration are often the anniversaries of the creation of the units, services or ministries to which the veterans belong. For example, on 29 August, Special Forces Day, all Spetsnaz units meet at Mount Poklonnaya; commemorations of policemen may take place on 10 November, the official day of the "Internal Affairs Service Officer" (commonly known as "Police Day"), or on 1 April for SOBR veterans. Some veterans also hold commemorations on 1 January in memory of the soldiers who died during the assault by Russian troops on Grozny on the night of 31 December 1994.

Whatever form these meetings take, they offer veterans a space of mutual understanding where silence becomes a mode of communication. The veterans recognise the therapeutic effect of these exchanges:

"I think I got through it because of our meetings with the veterans once a year. When you keep all this inside you and when you have the possibility of expressing yourself [*vygovorit'sā*] in front of people who think like you, who understand you without you needing to speak, even half a word, who understand you on a certain spiritual level, that is essential, that is the most important." (Dimitri, 9/12/19).

The homogeneity of war experiences and the empathy offered by private interactions make it possible to feel understood without the need to speak, explain or justify one's experience (Jouhanneau, 2016: 306). Far from signifying oblivion, silence therefore reveals the existence of a collective memory that authorises it. In the same way, we can think that recourse to the humorous register presupposes a complicity based on shared representations of the past, which makes possible the use of a very black humour that is not afraid to shock.

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We have presented only a few avenues for constructing a sociology of the memories of Russian veterans of the Chechen wars. Other factors need to be taken into account: biographical trajectories and breaks, the war experience itself or the context of interaction with the interviewer. We also see the importance of affects and identity in the expression of war memories and their link to a "staging of the self", which invites us to give pride place to sensitivities and subjectivities.

According to Lavabre, memory is an 'ever-intermediate object', which gives a point of access to society as a whole (Lavabre in Jouhanneau 2016: 28). The study of Russian veterans' memory could thus shed more light on the processes of distancing, adherence to or appropriation by individuals of the political discourses produced by the authorities in an authoritarian regime, including within circles often perceived as being the most loyal to it.

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