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Meet the New Russian Man, Shaped by War

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A Russian artillery man firing a **Alexei Konovalov/TASS**

War impacts gender hierarchies and gender roles deeply, reducing men to their duty of protection over vulnerable women. The masculine duty to defend the state becomes even more acute during wartime.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin's propaganda has promoted a militarized masculinity as an ideal above softer alternatives. This wartime shift is captured in a video circulated on Telegram not long after the partial mobilization in September 2022.

Two young men in sweatshirts, sitting on a bench and chatting, appear to contribute little to the economy or the labor force. But they are the ones highlighted as real men — whereas the successful, wealthy banker hurrying to leave Russia is dismissed as a selfish boy.

The banker's failed masculinity is shown by his refusal to carry out his duty to protect

vulnerable women as an elderly woman falls near his expensive car. Instead, his driver crushes the oranges that the elderly woman bought with what little money she has. Not only does he fail to act as the protector, but he harms the more vulnerable in society.

The two young men, by contrast, are Russia's future. They have stayed loyal to the state, ready to fight for Russia on the field or in the street.

The advert seeks to make people who identify with the youths proud and shame those who fled like the banker. It reflects not only the popular resentment against those often upper-middle-class, well-educated Russians who left in the first months of the war, but also a recalibrating of who is hailed as a true Russian man.

Exemplifying this redefinition is the outsized role that the Wagner Group came to play in the first 18 months of the full-scale invasion. Its mercenaries epitomized raw, aggressive, unfiltered, shirtless "*muzhik*" masculinity in contrast to the sleek cosmopolitanism associated with corporate elites and the economic turmoil of the 1990s.

Prigozhin's recruitment of troops directly from Russia's prisons greatly contributed to this re-evaluation, turning obscure, excluded individuals in society into war heroes. This is part of what political scientist Ivan Krastev called an attempt to redefine the Russian nation: "Prisoners are welcomed in the nation, while all those anti-war cosmopolitan elites, including some of Putin's oligarchs, are not."

In an unofficial 2024 calendar, the FSB veterans' charity further exalts this type of masculinity. The Russian soldier — a faceless, nameless man, heavily clad in head-to-toe combat gear — is validated in his masculinity by a series of feminized figures reduced only to their shared vulnerability.

The calendar's artwork places modern Russian soldiers in a continuous line of ethnically Russian heroes, from President Vladimir Putin — portrayed in a tight Z-branded T-shirt flaunting very muscular arms — to Peter the Great and Alexandr Nevsky.

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Other materials to encourage conscription emphasize even more explicitly the inflated masculine and societal value of military service, compared to other occupations. In one advertisement, men in various service jobs are shown fleetingly in military uniform, then back to their normal work clothes, with messages encouraging them to put their skills to better use by becoming soldiers. At the end, the text on the screen reads, "Aren't you a real man? Be one."

This messaging plays on the promise that through military service, working-class men can now aspire to the wealth and status once only available to urban elites. In Russia (as in many countries), military service is tied to material success as well as heroic status.

In a first-hand account of life in his parents' village, historian Sergei Chernyshov describes the appeal that a soldier's wages and honor have for men from poor and remote areas in Russia's provinces. Enlisting can mean death, of course. But it can also mean coming back

with more cash than most can ever imagine making in their deprived hometowns.

For criminals, it can mean rehabilitation and social approval. Chernyshov wrote that a former Wagner soldier who had spent his life in prison for petty theft and hooliganism lived on the same street as his parents. "Now he has a medal and a brand new car. He took his parents on holiday to the seaside. They supposedly cried with pride for their son."

Clare McCallum documented a shift in "heroic masculinity" from the soldier to the worker during the post-war Soviet Peace movement in the 1950s and 60s. One could argue that Russia is now experiencing the opposite shift.

The permeation of this ideology into Russian society has led to dire consequences in the war and when soldiers return home. Since February 2022, the Russian regime's repression and intimidation of its people have rapidly worsened. Masculinized violence has come to define not just the Russian army's gender posturing, but the regime's actions at home and abroad.

The Russian army's new and aggressive masculinities brutally manifest in the acute prevalence of sexual violence. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine has produced alarming reports of sexual violence committed "at gunpoint, with extreme brutality," on victims as young as four years old. One prosecutor in the Kherson region called it a "systematic approach." In occupied Ukrainian territories, this violence largely targets women and girls, whereas victims in detention are mostly male POWs — against whom violence is often perpetrated to dehumanize them by symbolically stripping them of their masculinity.

Kateryna Busol, a human rights lawyer, argues that authorities have created a "permissive environment for sexual violence" by failing to hold soldiers accountable for their atrocities, pardoning murderers and rapists in return for service and encouraging the brutal hazing of new recruits.

But conscription is also to blame. Political scientist Dara Kay Cohen showed in 2013 that armed groups that rape is used as a method of socialization when troops are recruited forcibly or from prisons. Rape acts as a bonding mechanism to create unit cohesion among anxious conscripts in unfamiliar environments.

Cohen's research helps make sense of the many stories of soldiers gang-raping women, while others watch and even cheer. One man who was held in a Russian detention facility recalled hearing soldiers jointly rape another detainee with a baton, saying, "They enjoyed it. They were having fun."

It is easy to see how the emphasis on aggressive masculinity outlined here could contribute to this behavior. Soldiers are being told that the only correct masculinity they can exhibit is violent and "*muzhiki.*" They are shown that the most praiseworthy men in society are now criminals and those wielding weapons. In group contexts, this is conducive to participating in rape to prove one's belonging to the correct category of masculinity.

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But this is reinforced by the Defense Ministry's ruthless approach to conscription. Thousands

of newly naturalized migrants, especially Central Asian men, are being forced into military service through passport-seizing and abusive court cases over minor debts. Men recruited from prisons are already routinely exposed and desensitized to sexual violence as a means of discipline. On the battlefield, this creates volatile and emotionally challenging environments.

When soldiers return from the war, the normalization of violence continues to have dire consequences. Soldiers return home traumatized and emboldened by the legalized violence they were exposed to, often materializing as domestic abuse. In 73% of cases where military men were charged with battery, the victims were women, mostly close relatives of the perpetrator. A former convict returned from the front was pardoned by Putin and went on to stab his girlfriend to death with a hunting knife.

In many stories, the perpetrators are often former Wagner fighters, which seems to confirm the link between an emphasis on aggressive masculinity and actual aggressive behavior.

Soldiers' heroic status means they also mostly get away with violence. Instead of being offered adequate support to prevent them from committing crimes, or being given more than negligible fines when they do, they are pardoned, glorified, and invited to speak at schools. Such impunity further legitimizes violence against women as something normal and inevitable — perpetuating a vicious cycle of structural oppression.

Even when soldiers are offered some psychological help, this is mostly gender-blind and feeds into the same systemic issue. One Russian psychologist told Deutsche Welle that some psychologists treating soldiers with PTSD emphasize the heroic nature of their experience of war. "On an emotional level," he said, "it can be supportive therapy. But on a moral level, it normalizes violence and aggression."

The wartime reshaping of Russian masculinity is therefore both a cause and a consequence of wartime violence. Embedded in structural mechanisms that shape Russian society, it then creates further ripples of violence away from the front lines.

Decrypting these patterns can help us understand not just the behavior of Russian soldiers, but that of militaries more broadly. However, in the Russian case, they are part of a wider gendered picture. Putin has built the legitimacy of his invasion on the protection of an idealized traditional gender order and on the marginalization and securitization of LGBTQ+ people. It is hence crucial to remain attuned to the variety of complex roles gender plays in this war.

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