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Russian Authorities Glorify Military Wives and Mothers on Women's Day

By Angelina Trefilova

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President Vladimir Putin at the opening of a center to support war veterans and their families in Moscow.
Vladimir Novikov / Moscow Government

"Tatiana Sokolova will never hear her son call her 'mom' again. He heroically fell in the special military operation zone," began a news broadcast in the Chelyabinsk region about International Women's Day celebrations for the mothers of Russian soldiers.

This event, which saw flowers handed to soldiers' mothers, was organized by the United Russia Women's Movement, a group affiliated with the ruling party.

It was just one of many celebrations focusing on the mothers and wives of soldiers fighting in Ukraine — as well as the widows and families of those killed — ahead of International Women's Day this year.

International Women's Day is one of Russia's most significant holidays, celebrating women's

contributions to society, science and the workforce. It has deep roots in Soviet history, when it was promoted as a symbol of gender equality.

But since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian officials and state media have upheld a different ideal: being the wife or mother of a soldier.

"With the militarization of society, the education system and the economy, and with the 'ideal citizen' — the male soldier — being placed at the center, authorities are actively promoting the image of the soldier's wife as his counterpart," gender researcher Sasha Talaver told The Moscow Times.

"The portrayal of women in times of war and state crisis always emerges as a key point for political imagination," Talaver said.

This Women's Day, members of the United Russia party and pro-Kremlin activists have been delivering flowers, organizing literary events and visiting military families with gifts and food.

"We are proud of the women who raised the heroes of the special operation and the young men who have signed up as contract soldiers," Senator Daria Lantratova, co-chair of the United Russia Women's Movement, said this week.

The movement this week launched the "Flowers for the Mothers of Heroes" campaign to deliver presents and flowers to soldiers' relatives, which has spread to 40 regions.

In perhaps the most shocking Women's Day event, mothers of fallen soldiers were gifted meat grinders from local United Russia officials in the Murmansk region.

The news sparked a wave of criticism, as the kitchen appliance has become a grim symbol of the Russian military's high-casualty assaults in Ukraine.

After the story went viral in Russian and Ukrainian media, one mother of a deceased soldier recorded a video statement in which she said she had been planning to buy a meat grinder herself, but United Russia "gifted it to her just in time."

"I actually asked you for it," the elderly woman said.

In Cheboksary, a city in the republic of Chuvashia, officials organized an event exclusively for the widows and mothers of fallen soldiers.

"May grief soon turn into pride!" declared local deputy Yevgeny Kadyshev. The women were given bouquets and gift bags labeled "Happiness and Joy."

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Russian authorities, including the United Russia party, promote the image of a military wife or mother as the ideal of femininity, gender studies researcher Ella Rossman told The Moscow Times.

The United Russia Women's Movement was founded in the months following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 "as a clear response to feminist anti-war activism," Rossman said, referring to groups like Feminist Anti-War Resistance and movements of mobilized soldiers' wives and mothers.

"Right now, the most visible female archetype in the public sphere is the woman waiting for her soldier to return from the front," Rossman said. "But this is not the only image. There are completely opposing narratives, like that of military women themselves."

Rossman pointed to an article in a pro-Kremlin tabloid about a woman from Rostov who signed a military contract and went to war.

"She is a mother who left her daughter to fight, has already lost a leg in combat and tells journalists that as soon as she recovers, she will go back to the battlefield," Rossman said.

Local television stations have been covering Women's Day events for soldiers' mothers and wives, while also highlighting women assisting the war effort or fighting on the front lines.

After these official celebrations, politicians sometimes invite the women for tea. In Stavropol, a table was set for the mothers and wives of soldiers following a concert at a veterans' hospital.

"Some of them are waiting for their sons to return home. Others, unfortunately, have lost their defenders who gave their lives for the Motherland," Senator Daria Lantratova, representing occupied Luhansk, wrote on social media.

United Russia activists also delivered flowers to soldiers' mothers in occupied Donetsk.

"Your son is a hero. We congratulate you on this holiday and wish you well. We hope this war will end and peace will come," a United Russia Women's Movement activist told an elderly woman. After hearing the word "hero," the woman teared up.

"Don't cry," the United Russia activist told the older woman as they parted.

Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine also sent video messages to military mothers and widows ahead of the holiday.

"Heroes are born in families. Women give birth to us. Women raise us in kindergartens and schools. The making of any hero is thanks to the great women in his life," Leonid Lapin, a soldier who fought as a sniper platoon commander in Ukraine, said in a video message.

United Russia has even involved children with disabilities in the celebrations. In the Yamalo-Nenets autonomous district, mothers from a center for parents of children with mental and physical disabilities — along with their children — made greeting cards for soldiers' relatives.

"This is not just a good initiative. Seeing how children with special needs get involved, how their eyes light up, you realize we are on the right path," said United Russia member Alexei Komarevtsev.

In an interview with a local news channel, he described the craft project as "socialization" for

children with disabilities. Some of the cards, he added, will be sent to the front lines, "because there are also girls serving there."

In some regions, such as Tula, soldiers' wives and mothers received a one-time payment of 10,000 rubles (about $100) for Women's Day. Elsewhere, gifts included makeup sets or tickets to the philharmonic.

In the Moscow region, United Russia organized a makeup seminar for soldiers' wives, saying such initiatives "help strengthen family values and improve quality of life in society."

"War disrupts social norms and the way of life," Rossman said. "But war also imposes constraints on the very possibility of a rigid binary between male and female roles, even though war seems to fit that binary perfectly."

That is likely why the authorities have been working overtime to reinforce the Kremlin's idea of "traditional" values since the start of the war, she said.

"Russian authorities are forced to declare and reinforce traditional values [because] many families that were once intact before the war have now lost their fathers," Rossman said. "There are also military women — doctors, for example — and women who have voluntarily gone to war. Ignoring these women is impossible. They, too, are a target audience from a propaganda standpoint."

As the war drags on and Russia's battlefield losses mount, authorities are forced to balance different ideals of femininity in their propaganda messaging, Rossman said.

"They are constantly having to create different female archetypes for different audiences," she said.

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