Participation and Isolation: Russian Concepts of Disability After the Collapse of the Soviet Union

by

Emily Hoge
Class of 2015

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in History and Russian and Eastern European Studies

Middletown, Connecticut

April, 2015
Abstract

Disability in Russia is and was legally defined through work capacity, specifically through labor capacity remaining. Because of the meaning of labor in the Soviet period, labor capacity was strongly connected to the ability to participate in community and collective. Not surprisingly, the inability to participate in the community resulted in isolation. Because trauma, in Russia, is defined as an experience that causes a person to be separated from the rest of society, rather than as an individual experience, disability is experienced as traumatic. The experience of trauma, through the inability participate in the community because of isolation, is, in turn, an experience of disability. Disability, therefore, primarily refers to the way in which Russians understand themselves in relation to the state, to the collective and to the community through meaningful participation. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, however, the state and the Soviet collective disappeared. In the absence of a community to participate in, in the absence of access to meaningful forms of participation, the 1990s were a period of traumatic, individualizing isolation. In this context, where everyone was isolated, the nature of identity changed. Without a general community to be isolated from, the division between abled people and disabled people was more ambiguous. When new concepts of participation and community emerged out of the 1990s, so too emerged new concepts of disability.
Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Davenport Committee for providing me with the opportunity to conduct research in Russia, without which this thesis would not have been possible

To Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock for helping me find my academic place

To Peter Rutland for guidance

To Laura Ann Twagira for patience, mentorship and encouragement

To Sarah, for commiseration

To Quinta, for everything

And finally to my family for their love and support
Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
  Defining Disability in Russia .................................................................................... 5
Organization of the Thesis .......................................................................................... 10
  Sources and Methods ............................................................................................. 16
  Other Contexts of Disability .................................................................................... 21

Chapter 1: What is Disability ...................................................................................... 24
  Victims of War and Revolution .............................................................................. 27
  Shock Workers to Stakhanovites .......................................................................... 32
  The War and the War Cult ...................................................................................... 39
  Parasitism ............................................................................................................... 45
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 52

Chapter 2: Motherhood and the Collapse .................................................................. 57
  The Happy Soviet Childhood ................................................................................... 61
  The Unhappy Post-Soviet Child ............................................................................. 77
  Other Women’s Families ....................................................................................... 83
  Meaningful motherhood ......................................................................................... 86
  The Isolated Family ................................................................................................. 90
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 95

Chapter 3: Lost Children, Grieving Mothers and Unpopular Wars ......................... 97
  Grieving Mothers .................................................................................................. 103
  Old Young Men .................................................................................................... 108
  Forgotten Wars ...................................................................................................... 117
  Chechentsi ............................................................................................................. 122
  Union of Invalids of the Afghan War .................................................................... 129
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 132

Chapter 4: Trauma Power and the New Russian ..................................................... 134
  Soviet Masculinity .................................................................................................. 136
  Trauma and the Mafia ............................................................................................ 141
  The New Russian ................................................................................................... 147
  Addressing the Absurdity of Power ...................................................................... 153
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 162

Chapter 5: Traumatic Brotherhood and Traumatic Nationalism ............................ 164
  Brotherhood and Masculine Participation ............................................................. 168
  Mothers of the National Family ............................................................................ 179
  Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 187
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Disabled Sports Nationalism</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sochi Paralympics</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Sources</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Sources</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

I spoke to Katya in mid-July at the Early Intervention Institute\(^1\) in St. Petersburg. I arrived just at closing time, as a few remaining groups of parents with their children were leaving. Katya was still busy, and told me to wait for a moment while she finished up. She seemed to be the only person still there, and I worried that I was intruding, or that after a full day of working so frantically she might be tired and not interested in talking about a difficult topic after all. Katya, however, was not tired. As soon as the last children had walked out the door, she came over to me and started explaining her work, before I managed to introduce myself. She was a forceful person, and we ended up talking for hours because she never ran out of things to say.

Twice, while we were talking, I noticed her skip over the entirety of the 1990s. The first time, when I stopped her to ask for clarification, she simply waved me away and continued talking. The second time, we were talking about how her patients thought about medical care, and how that changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. First, she told me about the Soviet period. Then, “In the last 10 years or so, however…”

“What about 20 years ago, in the 1990s? Was this true then as well?” I asked.

“No,” she said, “The situation was not the same at all.”

“What did people do in the 1990s?”

\(^1\) An institution which supports the well-being of young children
We had otherwise been entirely calm and friendly, but this question made her angry or exasperated, as if I had not been listening to her at all. “It was simply entirely different! That time cannot be talked about in the same way.”

Often, in my interviews, the 1990s did not fit into the timeline. Sometimes, they appeared as only a rupture. There was a before and after, but no during. Other times, they were simply absent. Life progressed from the 1980s directly into the 2000s. Often, the position of the decade in time was off, appearing more recently or more distantly than they actually were. Another woman I interviewed, Alla, said that the point, five to ten years earlier, when she was disabled after a botched surgery on her spine was the worst possible point to be disabled. “20 years ago,” she said, “it would have been much better.”

“Five to ten years ago was worse than 20 years ago?” I said, “What happened then that made this the worst time?”

Our conversation had so far been in Russian, since Alla had studied English when she was a teenager and not since. After this question, she looked at me incredulously, and then answered in English, as if she no longer believed I could understand Russian. “This is because of our Russian history. Ten years ago, or fifteen. Twenty years ago. After the end of… sovuz sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik!”

“Oh, I understand. In the 1990s?”

---

2 Katya. Interview by author. (2014, July 18). St. Petersburg, Russia
4 Alla. Interview by author. (2014, July 21). St. Petersburg, Russia
5 USSR
“Yes! 20 years ago, now.” For the rest of the time we talked about the 1990s, she spoke in Russian. She was not the only one who switched languages to talk about the 1990s. In my interviews that were done in a mix of English and Russian, the 1990s often came up only in Russian.⁶

Some of the people I interviewed instead remembered their own personal timeline of the 1990s with excessive clarity. Nataliya, who I met in Moscow, said the day that she was first introduced to the idea of working with disabled children was October 3rd, 1993. “I remember this so clearly,” she said, “because it was the day that Yeltsin brought tanks in to shell the White House.”⁷ When she described other time periods in her life, even more recent time periods, Nataliya was sometimes vague. Yet, this day, and other points in the 1990s, she described in crisp physical detail.⁸

Disabled people, especially, described the 1990s in language that sounded to me like descriptions of trauma. When a person describes a traumatic experience, it can appear as a rupture in the narrative, with a clear before and after.⁹ Sometimes people have a flat emotional response to recounting traumatic events, or withdraw into themselves when talking, or have trouble talking.¹⁰ The 1990s were a difficult time in Russia. The decade was punctuated by constant economic crises, social...

---

⁶ Ekaterina. Interview by author. (2014, July 16) St. Petersburg, Russia
⁷ The Russian White House is the seat of Russian parliament, the 1993 constitutional crisis was a source of sort of traumatic memory of the 1990s See: Lilia Shevtsova, Yeltsin’s Russia: Myths and Reality(Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999). p 79-103
⁹ See: Cathy Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory(Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995).
¹⁰ See: Boris Drozdek, Voices of Trauma: Treating Psychological Trauma across Cultures.
upheaval and ideological collapse. In my interviews, however, the 1990s did not just appear as a difficult time. They appeared as a traumatic time.\textsuperscript{11}

Sometimes, the post-socialist 1990s are described as a cultural trauma,\textsuperscript{12} which is typically considered a different kind of trauma than the kind that could be considered a mental illness.\textsuperscript{13} A cultural trauma is an event, which causes a culture or group to be changed or to change the meaning of their identity. The 1990s, however, were experienced in terms of illness, rather than identity.\textsuperscript{14} The suicide rate and mortality rate increased drastically.\textsuperscript{15} More people were sick, and fewer people had access to social support.\textsuperscript{16} Necessarily, therefore, more people were disabled. This is a feature of the experience of trauma.

In the United States, trauma functions largely in terms of the individual. Trauma is the result of an individual person’s emotional and psychological response to an event.\textsuperscript{17} In Russia, trauma is often thought of differently. Rather than resulting from an individual’s experience, and how it changes them, trauma occurs when a

\textsuperscript{11} i.e., even positive memories of the time period were defined as traumatic.
\textsuperscript{13} Neil J Smelser, "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma," in Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity, ed. Jeffery C Alexander(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). pp 31-60
\textsuperscript{15} David Zaridze, et al. "Alcohol and Cause-Specific Mortality in Russia: A Retrospective Case-Control Study of 48557 Adult Deaths," The Lancet 373, no. 9682.
\textsuperscript{17} See: Tracy X. Karner, "Masculinity, Trauma, and Identity: Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" Diss. (Ann Arbor, 1994).
person experiences an event that isolates that person from the rest of their community.\textsuperscript{18} Necessarily, therefore, the concept of a cultural trauma must work differently as well. Trauma of the 1990s was experienced and described not only as a cultural experience, but as a personal and physical one. The trauma of the 1990s was individual. It was disabling.

Defining Disability in Russia

In Russia, disability is defined through work. I read that fact multiple times,\textsuperscript{19} but did not fully understand what it meant until I started talking to people. It is not a minor legal or semantic difference. I went to Russia thinking about visible and invisible, mental and physical disabilities\textsuperscript{20} and was quickly told my questions made no sense.\textsuperscript{21} One of the first people I met who considered herself disabled was a woman with cancer, who considered herself disabled first and foremost because she was dying, and because she was young.\textsuperscript{22} The elderly are typically considered completely distinct from disabled people. A woman from one disability rights

\ \footnotesize
\textsuperscript{18} See: Hillary Richards, "Analyzing the 'Chechen Syndrome': Disadaptation of Veterans with War Trauma in Contemporary Russian Literature" Diss. (Duke University, 2012).
\textsuperscript{20} Both of these divides are common in how people about disability in the US. Invisible and visible is less generally common knowledge, but refers to the difference of experience of disability between those who are and are not typically read as disabled
\textsuperscript{21} Nataliya. Interview by author. (2014, June 17) Moscow, Russia
\textsuperscript{22} Viktoriya. Interview by author. (2014, July 28) St. Petersburg, Russia
organization emphasized that eliminating architectural barriers not only helped
disabled wheelchair users, but elderly people as well.\textsuperscript{23}

Alla told me she liked America because we have had a disabled president.
This has never and would never happen in Russia, she said, even if no one knew
about it. “We all learned about Roosevelt in school, one of the two American
presidents we liked. So now, when I feel like things are hard, or I want to give up, I
think, ‘Roosevelt led America through the war! I can at least get out of bed!’” When
she said this, I thought, ‘has Russia ever had a leader who was not disabled at some
point?’ Not to Alla, though. Brezhnev is often called an invalid in the US.\textsuperscript{24} Yeltsin’s
illnesses were a major problem of the 1990s.\textsuperscript{25} But to Alla, neither Yeltsin nor
Brezhnev were disabled in the same way that she is disabled.

Bodies, clearly, are not the primary way people define disability. Alla
considered Roosevelt, unlike Brezhnev or Yeltsin, disabled because he had become
disabled when he was young, rather than through old age. The woman with cancer did
not consider herself disabled because of her pain or illness, but because she would die
before she was old. This is the result of a work-based definition of disability. While in
the US, people say disability is the one category of difference that we all someday
inhabit, this is not true in Russia. The elderly are not expected to work. If you use a
wheelchair or are sick after the point you would not be working, you are not disabled.
You have not lost labor capacity.

\textsuperscript{23} Yulia. Interview by author. (2014, June 30) Moscow, Russia
\textsuperscript{24} i.e. Alexander Chubarov, \textit{Russia's Bitter Path to Modernity} (Edinburgh: A&C
Black, 2001). p 147 “Yet the ruling party hierarchy continued to prop up the
invalid leader at the top of the party-state pyramid.”
\textsuperscript{25} Shevtsova, \textit{Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality}. 
This is how that definition worked out for me: I have a collection of chronic illnesses resulting from an immune disorder, including arthritis, and dysautonomia.\textsuperscript{26} At some point, it is likely I will start walking with a cane, but for now my disability is usually invisible. In the US, when I identify myself as disabled, abled people have a tendency to glance skeptically at my legs. There are both benefits and drawbacks to never being read as disabled, but for me it is a consistent experience. Without a signed doctor’s note, people rarely believe that I am disabled when I tell them. Not in Russia.

On a day in which I was particularly sick, I went to one of the few accessible museums in Moscow with a group of other American students. The elevator there was reserved for pregnant people, invalids and the elderly. There was a woman working it, who stopped anyone else from trying to use it, including the rest of my group. On the way up, she let me use it, but when I came back at the end of the visit she had left, and the elevator could not be called. I was standing by the elevator for a few moments before two guards showed up. I was a little nervous. I am used to being yelled at for trying to use elevators, and my comprehension for angry Russian is poor.

What I feared was not what happened, however. One of the guards came over to me and asked, “Are you trying to use the elevator? Are you disabled?” I said yes, and explained that it seemed like the woman operating the elevator had left, so instead I would try to go down the stairs. “No you won’t!” she said to me. To the other guard, she said, “This young girl is disabled, and cannot use the elevator! This is unacceptable. Wait here, while I fix this!” She left, and we waited for her. After a

\textsuperscript{26} An umbrella term for different kinds of malfunctions of the autonomic nervous system.
few minutes, she radioed the other guard that there was a service elevator on the other side of the museum. Despite my protests that it would honestly be easier to go down the stairs than walk to the exact opposite side of the museum, the guard insisted. Though he had seen me standing without assistance for at least 10 minutes, he tried to pick me up. I resisted, and eventually we compromised. He put one of my arms over his shoulder and walked me along until we reached the other elevator. When I finally found my way back to the main entrance, a group of elderly French women were waiting by the unusable elevator. No one seemed quite as intent on helping them.

I had never before had to deal with this kind of well-meaning but potentially troublesome help before. At no point did either guard think that I might be lying about needing the elevator. When I told the guard that I was disabled, I was speaking socially, disability as identity, and assumed that she heard me describing something medical, that a doctor had diagnosed me as ‘disabled.’ Instead, I think she heard disability with a quite specific legal and social meaning. Identifying myself as disabled did not require a skeptical assessment of my body, a check of physical evidence of my illness. Identification as disabled alone was sufficient. From there, assumptions about my body were placed onto me. This was a nearly exact reversal of the kind of interaction typical of my experience as a disabled person in the US.

People I spoke to in Russia told me that this kind of reaction to a disabled person is fairly new. A few years ago, I probably would not have been helped at all, let alone so aggressively. Many of my interviewees described abled people responding to them aggressively when they asked for help, sometimes saying that people like them should not be allowed out of their homes if they could not get
around on their own. In the 1990s, people started to think about disabled people in a different way, and in the last five years or so, people have suddenly become helpful. That help, however, remains conditional and individual. For example, buildings, by and large, remain inaccessible. Other disabled people described this change as well, but not universally. One woman said to me, “Of course, you’ve noticed that people never help disabled people here.”

The meaning of disability, as I am using it, is complicated. Legally, disability is and was defined through a person’s remaining capacity to work, continuing from a 1932 law that, up until 2014, still has barely changed. Because of the meaning of labor in the Soviet period, labor capacity was strongly connected to the ability to participate in community and collective. Not surprisingly, the inability to participate in the community resulted in isolation. Because trauma, Russia, is defined as an experience which causes a person to be separated from the rest of society, the experience of disability is traumatic. The experience of trauma, through the inability to participate due to isolation, is, in turn, an experience of disability.

Disability, therefore, primarily refers to the way in which Russians understand themselves in relation to the state, to the collective and to the community through

27 Roman, Interview by author. (2014, August 4) St. Petersburg, Russia
28 Evgenia. Interview by author. (2014, July 14) St. Petersburg, Russia
29 There have been some changes in the legal status of disabled people since then. For example, though disability is still measured through work capacity, working no longer causes a disabled person to lose their status as disabled. This is helpful for people like Anna, who has diabetes, for whom medicine was previously available through disability status which might have been lost through work, but bad for people like Alla, when it was used to cover for the lack of support provided to disabled people. In 2008, Russia signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which most disabled Russians whom I spoke to considered a particularly significant moment.
meaningful participation. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, however, the state and the Soviet collective disappeared. In the absence of a community to participate in, in the absence of access to meaningful forms of participation, the 1990s were a period of traumatic, individualizing isolation. In this context, where everyone was isolated, the nature of identity changed. Without a general community to be isolated from, the division between abled people and disabled people was more ambiguous. When new concepts of participation and community emerged over the course of the 1990s, so too emerged new concepts of disability.

Organization of the Thesis

Disability history has tended to focus primarily on Western Europe and the United States in defining and understanding disability. The concept of disability in Russia is quite different, and as such theoretical concepts of disability emerging from a ‘Western’ context do not always apply. Disability in Russia, however, is a largely unknown subject, and the scholarly literature is scant. Some writing, in both English and Russian, exists with a public policy or a human rights focus, generally directed towards an activist audience.\(^{30}\) Because I am not primarily approaching disability from a legal or medical standpoint, this work tended to be less relevant.

One of the earliest works on disability as it is experienced in Russia and the Soviet Union is William O. McCagg and Lewis Sieglebaum’s *People with

Disabilities in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice. More recently, the most significant scholar in both English and Russian working on disability in Russia is Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova, who also often works with Pavel Romanov. Her work covers a broad selection of relevant topics related to disability, including cultural representations of disabled people, the lives of disabled children, related public policy and activism. Among her other significant works, Iarskaia-Smirnova also edited Disability in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union, which was particularly helpful to me, including work by most scholars working on disability in Russia. Other important scholars include, among others, Sarah Phillips, who works primarily on mobility disorders in Post-Socialist Ukraine, Susan Burch, who works on Soviet Deaf culture, Adriana Petryna, who studies

38 Sarah Philips, Disability and Mobile Citizenship in Postsocialist Ukraine(Indiana University Press, 2010).
disability in relation to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and Beate Fiesler, who studies disabled veterans of the Great Patriotic War.

In general, while the work of these scholars has been extremely useful to me, the category of disability is treated in these works is left largely undefined, or is limited to a largely legal concept. Often, these works focus on a specific subset of disability in order to create a history of disabled experience in Russia. This is certainly important work, as disabled people have often been left out of the history of the Soviet Union and Russia. At the same time, it also tends to leave the concept of ability unexamined. In this thesis, I will instead define a broader social meaning of disability, based not on its legal definition but on how it is experienced and understood. I will also look at the meaning of ability as a conceptual framework, which Russians use to understand themselves and the state. In doing so, I hope to indicate a concept of disability that is a useful and necessary framework for conceptualizing the history of Russia and the Soviet Union.

In my first chapter, I will look at the development of disability as a concept in the Soviet period, specifically through developing six terms which are fundamental to defining disability in Russia. These terms are collective trauma, individual trauma, isolation, participation, work and labor. I will show how broad shifts in the meaning of work, community and participation changed the meaning, both legal and social, of disability, and I will also indicate how disability can be central to the story of industrialization, war, and collapse.

My next four chapters will focus primarily on the 1990s as a period of trauma, in which the meaning of disability and ability were disrupted and reformulated. Each chapter approaches a different space in which concepts of disability were negotiated. Chapters two, three and four approach gendered concepts of identity and participation in the context of the family. Chapter five focuses on how the 1990s were redefined, in the 2000s, as a period of collective rather than individual trauma in order to create new forms of participation and community.

Chapter two looks at the development of the family as a core societal unit in the Soviet period, in order to understand its significance in the context of the 1990s. The family, in the 1990s, became the only remaining stable societal unit, and thus the only form of meaningful participation available. In the Soviet period, the ‘happy Soviet childhood’ was provided, through the support of the state, by women. For this reason, in the 1990s, the work of maintaining the family fell exclusively to women. While the work of motherhood had been a valid form of social participation in the Soviet period only when it contributed to the upbringing of an abled citizen, in the 1990s, motherhood itself was morally urgent work, which prevented the complete collapse of society. As such, the location of the disabled childhood moved from the state into the home. Abled mothers of abled children, however, tended to see families of disabled children as a drain on limited resources, which made their own work of motherhood more difficult. For this reason, motherhood of a disabled child was still seen as contributing to, rather than preventing, the collapse of society. Women who had reason to see families with disabled children as similar to their own families worked to create an alternative community of support for mothers of disabled
children. Disabled mothers, however, were unable to access this kind of community and were unable to preserve the intact family independent of state support, and so, for them, the intact family itself could be isolating.

In chapter three, I will look at images of traumatized veterans of Afghanistan and Chechnya, in order to argue that the traumatized veteran is also an image of a disabled child. The political context of these two unpopular wars, Afghanistan and Chechnya, meant that soldier’s trauma was not taken on as a form of societal identification, and as such was experienced as isolating. Veterans of both wars were used as an image of isolation for the purpose of critiquing society, but the context of this image and the reactions of the two groups to that image were extremely different. Veterans of Afghanistan formed tightly knit, highly political groups, which they used to redefine their trauma as collective. Chechen veterans had more in common with other isolated young people of the 1990s, and as such did not form their own communities. Veterans of Afghanistan, however, viewed veterans of Chechnya as fellow lost children, and incorporated them into their own narratives of alternative, isolated participation. Both groups created an isolated form of community participation through imagery of traumatic brotherhood, a form of familial participation that conflicted with the idea of the intact family.

In chapter four, I compare the image of the ‘New Russian’ as a stock joke character to the self-presentation of the 1990s Mafioso. In the Soviet period, most men had participated and found meaning through work and not through the family, and their participation in the family was restricted to economic support. In the 1990s, when many men lost their jobs and thus the economic means to provide for their
families, most men did not have access to a form of meaningful social participation. The only men who did have access to sufficient wealth defined themselves fundamentally through traumatic isolation from broader society, similar to the veteran’s image of traumatic brotherhood, and were considered responsible for the isolation of other men. As such, New Russian jokes served as a means by which men who were not in the mafia could attempt to redefine power, participation and masculinity in opposition to isolated and isolating Mafioso masculinity.

Chapter five looks at the redefinition of the 1990s in the 2000s as a period of collective rather than isolating trauma. Access to wealth was no longer a component of a newly redefined image of masculine participation, based on the image of traumatic, nationalist brotherhood. This new concept of participation in the family was maintained, with family redefined as the Russian nation. Men’s proper place of participation was not as fathers, but as sons and as brothers. Positive imagery of male participation redefined the 1990s as a period of isolation, imposed by ethnic and national outsiders, that Russian men suffered through and recovered from, while remaining loyal to other ethnically Russian men through ‘traumatic brotherhood.’

Women’s main form of participation continued to be motherhood, now focused on their function as mothers of the nation. Maintaining the ethnically Russian family included the collective motherhood of disabled children, but only as a temporary form of practice motherhood for young women.

Finally, in my conclusion, I will look at disabled sports in the context of the Sochi Paralympics as an available form of disabled participation in 2014. This new concept of participation creates a new gendered divide between abled participants and
disabled outsiders, which I will explore through the case study of disabled sports nationalism. While men, particularly those disabled in war, have access to a narrative of disabled participation through which they can redefine themselves as Russians and as men rather than as disabled people, women and men disabled as children are not able to move themselves out of the category of disabled outsider.

Sources and Methods

The legal meaning of disability has changed only slightly since 1932, while the social meaning and function of disability has changed significantly around that law. As such, official rhetoric, social policy and statistics are useful to me only in so far as they reflect a changing relationship with the meaning of legal disability and with disabled people considered deserving of state support. Health and medicine are also not particularly relevant to me, as disability and the body are only secondarily related.

Each of my chapters looks at a different context of disability and ability, a different form of participation and a different place in the family of the 1990s. As such, each chapter is also based on a different set of source, and a different form of representation of disability and identity. Focusing on one kind of source for each topic would have created a fundamental gap in my analysis, as they could not all be understood in the same way. Mass culture would not be a useful means of looking at how mothers of disabled children understood themselves, because representations of mothers of children born with disabled is rare. Instead, I use oral history interviews
with disabled women and women who work with disabled children to understand how they understood the place of disabled people in the context of the family. A significant feature of the form of traumatic nationalism of disabled veterans is that they do not want to talk about being disabled, especially to an American, so attempting to address veterans as a group through oral history would not appropriately cover their experience. Instead, I approach narratives of isolated veterans through their self-representation in memoirs and interviews compared to their representation by non-veterans in documentaries and films. The image of the ‘new Russian’ was found its expression in the New Russian joke, above other forms of media, and as such men’s relationship with masculinity and the mafia is best understood through the genre of jokes. Each of my chapters indicates a new space of disability and a new means of approaching isolation and participation in the 1990s.

I collected the oral history interviews I use primarily in chapters two and five during the summer of 2014, in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Over all, I conducted a total of 18 interviews. Chapter two primarily looks at four specific women, two abled women who worked with disabled children in the 1990s and two disabled women who became disabled in the 1990s, but I use many of the other interviews in other chapters, especially in chapter five. My interviews were conducted in Russian or English, though usually in a mix of the two. Almost all of my subjects were women. Approximately half of them were disabled, and the other half were abled people working with disability in some way. All of them were in involved in disability related groups, including activist organizations and sports teams. With some
exceptions who have been assigned pseudonyms, my subjects gave permission to use their real names, and as such identifying information has not been obscured.

Often, the people I spoke to wanted to talk to me primarily because they knew I was an American. For most of my interviews conducted in English, my subjects specifically stated that they were looking to practice their English.42 Others wanted to ask me, in turn, about disability in the United States.43 I few had never spoken to an American before,44 and a few simply thought my accent in Russian was funny.45 While my nationality influenced how and why women were interested in speaking to me, no woman refused to speak to me because of it. Disabled men, on the other hand, were very unlikely to speak to me primarily because of my nationality.

My age and gender were also significant in how my subjects saw me. Because I was born in the 1990s, women who I spoke to who were mothers in the 1990s necessarily had children about my age. As such, they tended to take a maternal attitude towards me, worrying about my health and comparing me to their own children.46 Women I spoke to who were disabled children in the 1990s, or who had

42 Yulia. Interview by author. (2014, June 30) Moscow, Russia; Elizabeta. Interview by author. (2014, June 17) Moscow, Russia
43 Nataliya. Interview by author. (2014, June 17) Moscow, Russia; Evgenia. Interview by author. (2014, July 14) St. Petersburg, Russia
45 Roman, Interview by author. (2014, August 4) St. Petersburg, Russia; Pavel, Dmitrii, Sergei, Mikhail, Nikolai. Interview by author. (2014, August 4) St. Petersburg, Russia
begun working with disability later on, tended to be my age or a few years older, and as such tended to assume that we shared experiences and concerns as young women.\textsuperscript{47}

In some of my interviews I identified myself as disabled and in others I did not. Often, I was asked why I was interested in writing about disability in Russia, usually by disabled people, and in the course of explaining I mentioned that I am disabled. Typically, this question seemed to be a way my subjects were trying to assess the sort of tone I would take towards disability in Russia, and knowing that I was disabled tended to make other disabled more comfortable talking to me. Abled people were less likely to wonder about that, and as such it came up less and seemed to matter less in my interviews.\textsuperscript{48}

Most of the films and documentaries I am analyzing were popular films for a popular audience, and much of my analysis is based on the source of each film’s general appeal. Movies, in the Soviet period, tended to be a popular form of entertainment, and were watched over and over again. The Russian film industry suffered in the 1990s, and the majority of movies in theaters were Western. As such, widely popular Russian films stand out all the more in my analysis of this period. Though I watched these movies in Russian, my knowledge of colloquial Russian is limited, and so I often rely on the English translations by writers with greater Russian language fluency when I include quotes. Similarly, the translation of the ‘New Russian’ jokes that I use in chapter four are not my own.

\textsuperscript{47} Evgenia. Interview by author. (2014, July 14) St. Petersburg, Russia; Anna. Interview by author. (2014, July 23) St. Petersburg, Russia

\textsuperscript{48} All of my disabled interviewees knew that I was disabled, and about half of my abled interviewees did.
The New Russian jokes I use are in a genre of Russian jokes called ‘anekdoti.’ Anekdoti do not exactly parallel western jokes in their social function or form. Anekdoti in Russia tend to fill a different set, or at least a wider variety of social functions than Western jokes. Anekdoti usually take the form of a short scene or a dialogue. Typically, they involve a set of familiar characters, including political figures, caricatures of different ethnic groups of varying levels of racism, characters from widely known media like Sherlock Holmes or Chapaev, and sometimes animals from Russian folklore.

Anekdoti cover an endless variety of topics, but they are often specifically political. Under Soviet censorship, they were often the main form of social satire available to people, and definitely the most convenient form, because they did not need to be written down to be passed around. For that reason, under Stalin, the whole genre was illegal as Anti-Soviet agitation. Viewing them as a form of dissidence is limiting, however. Anekdoti are typically cynical, and were generally dismissive or at least indifferent to official Soviet ideology. At the same time, they

---

49 I will be using ‘joke’ and ‘anekdot’ as largely interchangeable terms
tended to require fluency and engagement with Soviet rhetoric, often creating absurd situations through the language of Soviet propaganda.\footnote{N. N. Zarubina, "The Culture of Laughter as a Factor of Tolerance toward New Social Groups in Russian Society," \textit{Sociological Research} 47, no. 1 (2014).}

An unusual feature of the New Russian joke is that, unlike Soviet era anekdoti, they were likely to be published. A significant feature of the anekdot is often the way in which the teller of the joke performs the voices of the stock characters, and as such the joke is fundamentally changed in being consumed in a written format.\footnote{Seth Graham, "A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot" Diss. (University of Pittsburgh, 2003).} Further, in being written down, the New Russian joke functions seem to function as a more formal kind of published, authored satire, as opposed to an authorless form of oral folklore. At the same time, New Russian jokes are still presented in the form of an anekdot, and as such appeal to a tradition of oral folklore.

Other Contexts of Disability

For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to focus on only a few specific contexts of disability, which function as case studies. Necessarily, therefore, I have left out a number of relevant topics that would benefit from further analysis. My broad overview of disability in Soviet history in chapter one, for example, addresses only a few relevant changes in the meaning of disability in the Soviet period, and each section is necessarily simplified for the purposes of time, space and accessibility. In particular, because the rest of my thesis is focused on Russia, in analyzing Soviet
history I tend to focus only on the RSFSR and not on other Soviet republics.\textsuperscript{56} This is particularly noticeable in my explanation of the Soviet-Afghan war, because while I primarily analyze the experience of Russian soldiers, a significant percentage of Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan were from the Central Asian republics.

The history of childhood disability in non-ethnically Russian communities in Russia and in the Soviet Union is also quite different. IQ tests used to measure childhood ‘mental defectiveness’ were typically based on Russian culture, requiring knowledge of words primarily relevant to ethnically Russian children living in cities, and as such children from some Siberian indigenous groups were and are far more likely to be deemed defective and uneducable.\textsuperscript{57} In the post-Soviet period, my analysis is often limited to European Russia, certain major Russian cities, and, at times, to Moscow and St. Petersburg, as these places reflect a specific Russian ‘imagined community’\textsuperscript{58} which is the focus of my analysis. The lives of disabled people in rural Russia are quite different from the lives of disabled people in major cities, but it is also a much more difficult topic to address. Often, disabled people in rural areas, and even in many large Russian cities, do not have Internet access and are not able to leave their homes, and are therefore likely to be completely cut off from the outside world. Ultimately, I restricted myself to topics which were most relevant to the form of ‘traumatic nationalism’ I describe in my final chapter, and for which I

\textsuperscript{56} Some of my sources, such as documentaries that were viewed in Russia, have non-Russian origins and in that context I mention other Soviet republics
\textsuperscript{57} Iarskaia-Smirnova, “What the Future Will Bring I Do Not Know: Mothering Children with Disabilities and the Politics of Exclusion.”
had the most available sources. These gaps are avenues of future research, which I hope to be able to address in future work.
What is Disability?

The Russian word for a disabled person is ‘invalid.’ [инвалид] Russians sometimes also use phrases such as ‘lyudi s invalidnostyu’ or ‘ne trudosposobnie’ meaning ‘person with a disability’ and ‘not capable of labor’ in place of invalid. The disabled people with whom I spoke, however, generally preferred ‘invalid.’ They told me that those phrases tended to sound stiff, “politically correct” or clinical. These phrases were a little more generally disliked than person-first language to English speaking disabled people, and a little less painfully embarrassing than English phrases like ‘differently abled’ or ‘handicapable.’

The word ‘invalid’ came to Russian from French. The difference between its meaning in these two languages, however, is that the word for ‘valid’ in Russian

59 Maria. Interview by author. (2014, July 22) St. Petersburg, Russia, Elizabeta. Interview by author. (2014, June 17) Moscow, Russia
60 Certain disability rights activists, like perspektiva, prefer ‘people with disabilities’ but many disabled people dislike that language.
61 Irma. Interview by author. (2014, July 24) St. Petersburg, Russia
62 Person first language i.e. ‘person with disability’ rather than ‘disabled person.’ I dislike this language because it indicates disability as an inherent feature of my body rather than as an assigned category of difference. While some people dislike this language in the U.S. most people, including me, do not have strong feelings towards it either way. In Russia, a few activists groups much prefer it while other disabled people seem to strongly dislike it.
not sound anything like the word *invalid*. Therefore, there is no inherent measure of worth in the Russian word *invalid* as there is in the English word.\(^{63}\) A Russian dictionary from the 1800s defined ‘invalid’ as "one who served, revered warrior; unable to serve because of wounds or physical damage — worn out one."\(^{64}\) This definition is not particularly negative, and is even potentially positive.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will be using the words ‘disability’ and ‘disabled’ rather than the Russian word *invalid*. Partially, I have made that choice because, in my interviews, disabled Russians tended to translate ‘*invalid*’ as ‘disabled’ rather than more obvious English cognate.\(^{65}\) The main problem with choosing to use the English rather than Russian word is that it seems to indicate that the Russian and English concepts of disability are equivalent, which is not true.

The problem with using the Russian word, however, is the existence of the English word *invalid*. The plural, in Russian, of *invalid* is *invalidi*. It is pronounced slightly differently than either versions of the English ‘*invalid,*’ but, unfortunately, that is not clear on the page. Because ‘*invalid*’ is also a means of referring to disabled people in English, it necessarily comes with quite as much inaccurate cultural assumptions as the word ‘*disabled.*’ Moreover, because ‘*invalid*’ is a slur in English, it may be more difficult for non-Russian speakers to ignore their immediate emotional

---


\(^{64}\) Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History."

\(^{65}\) Presumably this is because many of these people have connections to American and British disability rights organizations, but it was also used by people without those connections, i.e. Alla. Interview by author. (2014, July 21). St. Petersburg, Russia
reaction to the word, or its various negative connotations. ‘Disabled’ is a more neutral term.

Often, disability in Russia is present largely as an absence. Disability policy in the Soviet period commonly served to hide disabled people away, and even now abled Russians are at times reluctant to talk about disability. Many of my interviewees pointed out that disabled people are rarely seen on the street. The absence of disability is in some ways an indicator of the significance of ability to the concept of Russianness. For example, while the word ‘invalid’ is a fairly concrete word, which is used to refer not to a set of qualities but to a group considered to be a specific category of people, there is not a quite so clearly defined term meaning ‘abled.’ People say ‘abled’ in a variety of different ways depending on context. The official, legal, Soviet-era word is ‘trudosposobnie,’ meaning work-capable, but no one I spoke to used that word. At other times people said things like ‘healthy,’ regardless of the health of the abled person being described.\(^66\) When I had not described myself as disabled, abled people I spoke to sometimes said simple “people like you or me.”\(^67\)

The most common way of saying abled, among both abled and disabled Russians who were involved in disability rights activism, was to say ‘normal,’ or

\(^66\) Alla said ‘healthy,’ and what was especially weird about that is that before becoming disabled she was sick, and became disabled because of a surgery to repair an injury. The period she describes as when she was healthy was when she was injured and needed treatment. She used ‘healthy’ when I was clearly unsure how to refer to her prior to her becoming disabled. At other times she said, ‘before my surgery.’ Both of these terms were used in reference to her life in the 1980s, and the 1990s were ‘at the time of my surgery’ and ‘after the surgery,’ though her surgery occurred in the mid-1990s.

\(^67\) Konstantin. Interview by author. (2014, July 17) St. Petersburg, Russia
'average,' preceded by a qualification that such language was obviously unsatisfactory. While ‘disabled’ is a concrete and specific identity label, there is no similarly concretely defined opposite term. Abled is simply ‘us’ for abled people and ‘normal’ from disabled people. Us, community and collective are therefore necessarily defined as abled. Those forms of identification are sufficiently tied to the idea of ability that there is no term needed, even when disabled people are speaking to other disabled people.

As such, disability is a fundamental concept for how people understood themselves in relation to community and to the state. That was not true, or at least not true in the same way, before the Soviet period. In this chapter, I will attempt to trace how that relationship came into being, by placing disability at the center of the narrative of Soviet history, where it has otherwise been largely absent.

Victims of War and Revolution

Laws addressing the needs of people unable to support themselves through work were introduced quickly after the Russian revolution. In the pre-revolutionary context, disability specifically referred to soldiers. When Soviet disability policy was established in the aftermath of the revolution, this was remained true. In quick succession, the First World War and the Russian Civil War produced a great number of ‘worn out soldiers,’ who were unable to support themselves through work, but who

---

68 Katya. Interview by author. (2014, July 18). St. Petersburg, Russia, Yulia. Interview by author. (2014, June 30) Moscow, Russia
were still considered deserving of state support. While, according to Lenin, “he who does not work neither shall he eat” was a socialist principle,” that slogan did not refer to those who, through no fault of their own, could not work.

In November 1917, a legal directive included all types of loss of work capacity in the state program of social insurance. In October 1918, the Statute on Social Protection of Workers guaranteed state assistance to those unable to support themselves due to loss of labor capacity. These laws provided support for people who were unable to work. Doctors assessed patients who had lost labor capacity to determine the extent of their loss, and the state gave out pensions to compensate for that loss.

Until the mid-1920s, however, the state only recognized those disabled in war as legally disabled. People who had lost work capacity in other ways received state support, but were not considered disabled. This category of not disabled, but unable to work, also included the elderly. There was not an age of retirement until the late

---

69 Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History."

70 Ibid.


1920s. Instead, elderly people stopped work only when they had lost labor capacity. As such, this category of non-working, non-disabled people was defined entirely in terms of health and the body, in that a sick, injured or ageing body functioned as an exemption from the requirement to labor.

By defining disability in terms of veterans' loss, disability came to be linked with sacrifice in the case of the civil war veteran and with victimization in the case of the veteran of the imperialist war. The phrase ‘victims of war and revolution’ was a meaningful one for a short time after 1917. Veterans were necessarily deserving of state support, and as such, being disabled had particular, largely positive connotations as used by the state.

Work was considered the ideal method for rehabilitating disabled veterans, and rehabilitation was the purpose of all Soviet disability policy. Disabled veterans were given workshops and classes for learning new trades, which they might be able to engage in despite being disabled. Homes for disabled veterans were divided based on what kinds of work people in them were able to do. This work was expected to be healing. Along with pensions, providing means by which disabled veterans could

---

76 Ibid. pp 102-27
engage in work, as a means of allowing them to reintegrate into Soviet society, was the main form of support provided by the state.

Disability in pre-revolutionary Russia had never been quite as specifically tied to bodies. In this new system, pensions provided to disabled veterans and other people physically incapable of work required a necessarily bodily assessment. Being unable to work and being disabled, however, were not the same thing, and disability, as it related to veterans, was a positive assessment of participation, victimization and loss. The policy of measuring loss of work capacity in terms of the pension system, which in the mid-1920s became disability policy, was a fairly practical means of dealing with the problem of people who were unable to work through no fault of their own. Providing pensions to those unable to work defined such people as not at fault, and as still deserving of state support.

The inability to work, for veterans, included psychological injury was well. The western concept of shell-shock, which was being defined during the late 1800s and early 1900s, was familiar in Russia before and after the Revolution. The Russian treatment and concept of traumatic neurosis was generally similar to the concept of shell-shock, and the tsarist government tended to approach treatment in ways similar to Western Europe. According to Catherine Merridale, medical attention turned to the idea of battle trauma during the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-1905. Most doctors regarded traumatic neurosis as indicating a selfish, weak personality, and it

---

77 Sirotkina, "Shell Shock in the Russian Army." pp 117-30
was attributed to ‘self-inflicted’ illnesses like alcoholism.\textsuperscript{78} From 1905 to 1917, Russian psychiatrists started to consider that traumatic neurosis might result from physical damage to the brain, and noted that the problem affected all kinds of soldiers, even the best ones.\textsuperscript{79} By 1916, during the First World War, psychiatrists with especially strong Western connections were calling for the establishment of hospitals for the treatment of traumatized patients.\textsuperscript{80}

Since many of the Bolsheviks had spent time exiled in Western Europe, many of them were familiar with and interested in Freudian psychoanalysis.\textsuperscript{81} After 1917, psychiatry as a profession flourished with the support of the state. After 1920, traumatized Red Army soldiers were treated by a psychiatric subsection of the Ministry of Health Care, which considered providing support for “victims of war and revolution” as its central task. In 1923, an institution specifically for the treatment of psychiatric patients was established, called Red Star.\textsuperscript{82} Support for trauma patients did not last long, however.

After Lenin’s death, as Stalin consolidated power, psychoanalysis was systematically delegitimized.\textsuperscript{83} By 1930, it was officially replaced with Soviet pedology, and Freudianism was thereafter considered a bourgeois science.\textsuperscript{84}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{79} Sirotkina, "Shell Shock in the Russian Army." pp 117-30
\textsuperscript{80} Merridale, "The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell-Shock in Twentieth-Century Russia." pp 39-55
\textsuperscript{81} Sirotkina, "Shell Shock in the Russian Army." pp 117-30
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. pp 117-30
\textsuperscript{83} Merridale, "The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell-Shock in Twentieth-Century Russia." pp 39-55
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. pp 39-55
\end{flushleft}
of a traumatized ‘victim of war and revolution’ disappeared, and so did traumatic neurosis as a diagnosis.\textsuperscript{85} Stalinist society was increasingly collectivist. Emotions were public and publically shared within the collective. During the 1930s, the state was often the source of traumatic experience, and so the collective public expression of trauma became impossible.\textsuperscript{86} Deviation from the norm, including in the individual experience of emotion, was discouraged, and could be potentially dangerous. Out of necessity, people dealt with traumatic experience by simply moving on and suppressing trauma.

In the aftermath of the revolution, disability policy focused on providing care for those disabled in war, ‘victims of war and revolution,’ whether their injuries were physical or psychological. More broadly, the new government regarded providing social support for those unable to support themselves through work as its responsibility, even if only veterans were initially classified as disabled. Disability as it applied to veterans was defined in terms of loss, indicative of victimization, which, for certain recognized victims, would be rectified by the socialist state. In the late 1920s, this definition became to change.

Shock Workers to Stakhanovites

In 1932, a new classification system for disabled people was introduced. Disability status was to be measured in terms of labor capacity remaining, rather than

\textsuperscript{85} Sirotkina, "Shell Shock in the Russian Army." pp 117-30
\textsuperscript{86} Merridale, "The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell-Shock in Twentieth-Century Russia." pp 39-55
labor capacity lost. Doctors from the Medical-Labor Commission of Experts (VTEK)\textsuperscript{87} measured the amount of work of which a person was capable by assessing that person in either a hospital or a work-place setting. People determined to be disabled were then put into one of three categories. Category I disabled people could not work at all, and required constant hospital care. Category II disabled people also had no labor capacity, but did not require hospital care. Category III disabled people could no longer work in the same job that they had held prior to being disabled, but could work in less skilled and lower paying jobs, or in specialized work environments.\textsuperscript{88}

These categories were not fixed for the rest of the disabled person’s life. Category I disabled people were reassessed every year, and Categories II and III disabled people were reassessed every six months.\textsuperscript{89} This process of reassessment stopped once the disabled person reached retirement age, a concept that had been established in the late 1920s.\textsuperscript{90} A person was only disabled so long as they would have been expected to be working, and so the loss of labor capacity was measured on a societal scale. The purpose of this law was in mobilizing a labor force, rather than in providing care. Disability was, therefore, redefined in terms of social usefulness, rather than degree of sacrifice or victimization.

\textsuperscript{87}Врачебно-трудовая экспертная комиссия, Vrachebno-trudivaya ekspertnaya komissiya
\textsuperscript{90}David Hoffman, Cultivating the Masses(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). pp 17-70
In addition, this change also reflected a movement away from disability defined in terms of bodies. Elderly people were no longer considered disabled, because they were no longer expected to work and so no longer had labor capacity. Severity of injury and degree of loss were not measures of disability, if the injured person were still capable of labor. Rather than being a means by which the state could assess the degree to which people were not at fault for being unable to support themselves through work, measuring disability in terms of work capacity remaining became a means of assessing their value to the state and collective.

The period from 1928 to 1932 was a period of enormous changes in the Soviet Union. 1932, the year this new law was passed, was also the year of the end of the first-five year plan. The focus of the first-five year plan was on rapid industrialization. The intent of the plan was to produce a socialist base for the new Soviet economy through the rapid development of heavy industry as well as the collectivization of agriculture. The goals of the plan were enormous, and quotas were not only expected to be filled, but massively overfilled. The focus on overfilling produced a number of problems and a great deal of inefficiency, because some factories produced more quickly than raw materials could be sent to them, and some made more product than was needed or could even be used.

That kind of wastefulness, however, was not a particular concern. The purpose of the plan was not to create useful products but to create a new economy. When the plan was somewhat arbitrarily declared filled after four years rather than five, the economy was dramatically changed. Over the period of 1928 to 1932, new industrial
centers rose up suddenly, especially in the Ural Mountains. These factories would go into production during the second five-year plan.  

This focus on speed, overfilling and drastic change tended to come with a heavy cost in human life. Collectivization, in particular, created incalculable human suffering, and millions of deaths, especially in Ukraine. The creation of Soviet heavy industry also had its own share of death. Fast production produced unsafe work conditions. Materials, like scaffolding, used to safely build factories, were made as quickly and inefficiently as anything else, when they were made at all, and production could not wait until safer materials arrived or for these things to be fixed when they were broken. Such unsafe work conditions produced a great deal of industrial accidents, and therefore a great number of people disabled not by war but by the militarized economy.

Among other societal and cultural changes, the first five year plan radically altered the social and political meaning of labor. For one thing, there was simply more of it, and more people doing it. The plan required a massive mobilization of a labor force. The shock work movement originally arose in the mid-1920s. It became widespread after 1929, as a way of encouraging socialist competition to fulfill the five year plan. The goal of the shock workers was the overfulfillment of the plan. At first, they focused primarily on intensifying labor, but after 1930, shock work

---

brigades organized and streamlined labor to increase production. They established ‘counter-plans’ which exceeded the norms imposed from above, by finding hidden production potential in their factories and collectives. Eventually, shock workers were fully incorporated into the labor force. Every worker was, ideally, supposed to act like a shock worker, and all factories participated in shock work days.

The shock work movement encouraged collective labor and collective achievement. Shock workers tried to raise the average of production of the collective, rather than simply produce more themselves. Shock workers established new plans by reassessing the potential of the collective to produce, meaning that all members of the collective needed to raise their production and work to the limit of their ability. Reduced work capacity of an individual, therefore, reduced the production capacity of the entire group and reduced the collective’s ability to engage in socialist competition. In this environment, disabled workers stood out.

During the first five-year plan the crime of wrecking was introduced to the Soviet penal code. Wrecking included any action that negatively affected the Soviet economy and the fulfillment of the plan. There were three subcategories of wrecking: diversions, the act of inflicting damage to state property; wrecking, deliberately preventing the normal function of state organizations, and sabotage, the non-execution or careless execution of duties. Wreckers, people were told, were part of an enormous network of secret counter-revolutionaries looking to sabotage the Soviet

---

94 Ibid.
95 Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*.
project. Any problem that arose during the first five-year plan, including industrial accidents or the failure to fill and overfill the plan, was blamed on wreckers.

The Stalinist state instilled a great deal of paranoia and mistrust in its citizens, telling them to be on the lookout for wreckers and enemies who were always around. Disabled people, injured people, and people with lower work capacity made collective production averages fall, indicating that some one was not working to the limit of the potential of the average worker. That looked quite a lot like sabotage. Further, since a disabled workers stood out, sometimes visually, they could not be fully part of a collectivism that attempted to erase the individual entirely. Being disabled was suspicious.97

When the new law defining disability was passed in 1932, the social meaning of disability had already changed a great deal. When doctors assessed what kind of work capacity the disabled person had left, they did so in a context in which not working to the same degree as those around you was inherently suspicious, and not working to the absolute limit of your ability meant being part of a conspiracy to destroy the Soviet project. Thus, the process of assessment included the inherent assumption that the disabled person might not really be disabled, or at least not as disabled as they claimed.

In the second five-year plan, shock workers were not as prominent anymore, though as an ideal they never fully disappeared. In 1935, a new movement for socialist competition started after a coal miner named Aleksei Stakhanov produced

---

97 Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova, "Heroes and Spongers: The Iconography of Disability in Posters and Film."
fourteen times the production quota in one shift. A largely manufactured movement cropped up following his example. Stakhanovites, who exceeded production targets and broke records, were held up as model workers in the press and in literature, and all workers were told to emulate their examples. Unlike the shock worker movement, Stakhanovism celebrated individual achievement. Stakhanovites did not just work to the full extent of their work capacity, but exceeded what any average person could be assumed to be capable of. Stakhanovites had limitless work capacity, but, like disabled people, their work capacity meant that they individualized, outsiders in the collective. Whatever the propaganda said, average workers disliked the Stakhanovites for just about the same reason they disliked disabled people. Both groups disrupted the normal flow of production and required the rest of the group to work more to compensate.

Disabled people were even less able to participate in Stakhanovism than in shock work. A disabled person could work to the limit of their ability during a shock work day, but the focus on individual work capacity of the Stakhanovite movement put disabled people at the back of the line. Stakhanovites glorified a process of bodily sacrifice, in which an individual was spontaneously able, through inspiration and ideological commitment, to transcend the limitations of the organic body. All workers were then encouraged to work beyond their capabilities, including those with lower labor capacity and higher limitations.

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
Since 1917, work had been the ideal means of rehabilitating a disabled person. Through work, disabled people were expected to recover and regain their work capacity. Like a Stakhanovite, the ideal disabled person, through ideological commitment and willpower, worked beyond the limitations of the body and, in doing so, healed. Unlike Stakhanovites, through this process disabled people were expected to become average, to reincorporate themselves into the collective and cease to be isolated individuals. Failing to heal and remaining disabled indicated a lack of ideological commitment and a lack of the desire to participate.

In 1932, the legal definition of disability for the rest of the Soviet period was set. This legal definition came into being during a time in which the meaning of work, participation, the body and the collective were all undergoing rapid changes. The idea of bodily limitation, and of not being able to work when work was required, was suspicious in 1932, and then insufficient as a reason not to work by the end of the 1930s. Work was fundamental to participation in collective, and of an individual’s value to the state. Not working, even for a disabled person, was understood as something of a choice, because bodies were understood to be curable through work.

The War and the War Cult

The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union began on the 22nd of June, 1941. Quickly thereafter, the social meaning of disability, which had already undergone

---

drastic changes in recent years, started to change again. The war produced a great number of disabled people, who started returning from the front right away in huge waves, becoming increasingly visible and present in people’s lives.\textsuperscript{102} The war effort continued to require a massive mobilized work force, while all the abled young men were busy fighting. As such, disabled people, who were considered to be disabled through a lack of willingness to participate, had to be put to work.

Within a month of the invasion, the head of VTEK began to pressure doctors to be stricter in their assessments of disabled people. Doctors were told not to give disability status to anyone who could still in any way work in their old profession, not even if they had lost a limb. Only in the absolute most extreme of cases were doctors to ever hand out Category I or Category II status, the designation that a person was entirely incapable of work. Doctors, however, were reluctant to change their assessment standards or indicate that a person was capable of more work than they actually were.\textsuperscript{103}

So, instead, in June 1942, when the war effort was going badly, the People’s Commissariat of Social Welfare changed the meaning of the categories of disability. Reassessment timelines were halved, and definitions became stricter. Category II disabled people, who had been determined to be incapable of work, were now expected to engage in some kind of light work in a specialized environment.\textsuperscript{104} Invalid homes were also divided into two categories: hospital-type and work-type. In

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
1942, if you could get out of bed, you needed to be producing something for the war effort.\textsuperscript{105}

War propaganda films from the first part of the war tended not to show soldiers, or the war itself, as it was potentially too disheartening for people to see. Instead, these movies focused more on the stories of women, in particular women experiencing horrific trauma, but who became stronger and more determined through that trauma. Sometimes, in these films heroic women were opposed by Soviet citizens who were not necessarily saboteurs, a shift from earlier Stalinist films, but who were frightened and had not become stronger through their fear.\textsuperscript{106} Thus, the proper form of Soviet suffering was defined, through these films, as becoming stronger through horrific experience. This was an image of trauma, but a positive one.

When the tide of the war turned, male soldiers became the focus of war propaganda films more often. By the very end of the war, and especially in its immediate aftermath, a few films focused on disabled veterans.\textsuperscript{107} These films presented an image of the disabled person who overcame disability and returned to work. One of the most significant of these films, \textit{The Story of a Real Man}, will be addressed more fully in subsequent chapters. However, it merits brief mention here. In one famous scene, Alexei, a fighter pilot who lost both legs, dances on state-of-the-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
art prosthetics to indicate his readiness to fly again. Through his desire to return to and contribute to the war effort, Alexei ceases to be ‘held back’ by disability. Anna Krylova calls this genre ‘healing literature.’

Soviet doctors focused on treating the physical bodies of wounded veterans, providing wheelchairs and prosthetics when they were available, which was rarely. Even Soviet psychologists looked for physical origins for psychological trauma. When no physical injuries could be found, treating war trauma was left to art and culture. Narratives in which a traumatized person, usually with physical injuries, finds the ‘will to live’ and moves on, reincorporating into abled society and returning to work, were an example for disabled people on how to overcome their trauma, both physical and mental. When a disabled veteran failed to move on, become inspired, and start working again (thus ceased to be disabled,) the blame was placed on the individual, rather than on the Soviet health care system or the state. Thus, being disabled and remaining so, no matter what kind of trauma or injury the disabled person had, was unacceptable.

---

113 Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!": A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History."
During the 1940s and 1950s, it became increasingly impossible to talk about the war. Media about the war had to place Stalin firmly at the center of all decisions. For that reason, and as a way to move the country on from its trauma, negative aspects of the war were never mentioned. Care for disabled veterans had been moved into the private sphere, and, since many veterans had no system of support and disability pensions were insufficient to allow disabled veterans to support themselves, veterans in need and in poor condition were a common sight.\textsuperscript{114} To the state, these veterans were inherently a negative reminder of the war. In the late 1940s and 1950s, disabled veterans were removed from Leningrad and Moscow, and it is not clear what happened to them.\textsuperscript{115}

Disabled people did appear in dissident art and fiction of the same era. In art, there was a movement of representing disabled veterans as grotesques. Bodies of disabled people were used to create a sense of isolation, in which the presence of a disabled person only makes the abled viewer lonelier. The representation of a disabled veteran, or the fact that a person existed and was disabled, functioned as an inherent critique of the Stalinist body and the Stalinist memory of the war. For the rest of the Soviet period, in dissident art and writing, the disabled body continued to be used as a critique of Soviet state imagery of power.

Even after Stalin’s death in 1953, and the beginning of the Thaw in 1956, the negative associations of disability remained. For example, in \textit{Life and Fate}, which was written in 1959 but not published until 1980, Vasily Grossman describes the character Viktor as “like an invalid who came to life only when people spoke about

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
his disease.”

Disabled people do not function as an inherent critique of the system for Grossman, but through this particular metaphor he indicates that to him they still primarily exist as a problem for abled people. This sense that a disabled person is someone who fixates on their problems indicates that, even for people critiquing Stalinism, the Stalinist conception of disability remained. There was no acceptable way to be disabled. A good disabled person was someone who stopped being disabled. Otherwise, they were a burden and a problem for abled people, inherently depressing, inherently overly fixated complainers by virtue of existing while disabled.

After 1956, as part of the process of de-Stalinization, Khrushchev replaced Stalin’s cult of personality with a cult of the Great Patriotic War. The Soviet war cult under Khrushchev focused on the role of the Party in winning the war despite mismanagement by Stalin. Negative aspects of the war were mentionable once again, though only when attributed to Stalin. The war cult, as it developed, became a mix of personal memory and myth, and the memory of the suffering and trauma endured and overcome by the Soviet people was a significant part of it. Soviet children were taught from a young age to honor and never forget the pain and horror of the war. The experience of trauma, and recovery from traumatic experience, was a means of defining what it meant to be Soviet.

The contrast between the glorification of this collective, Soviet trauma and the treatment of individual trauma is stark. Essentially, there were two kinds of trauma. The good kind of trauma was collective, experienced and shared by everyone, as a

---

way to define the meaning of Soviet citizenship and Soviet group identity. This trauma was a form of participation in a collective project, and each suffering person became stronger and more committed through their trauma. The focus of this trauma was on the process of change, which makes a person better, as opposed to traumatic change that makes them weaker. Soviet school children were taught about the sacrifices of their parents in the Great Patriotic War as a means of defining Soviet identity to the point that towards the 1980s, the war cult became quite absurdly overblown.\footnote{Ibid.}

The bad kind of trauma, on the other hand, was the kind experienced by individual people. This kind of trauma made participation more difficult, and was seen as a selfish choice. While the good kind of trauma created group identity, the bad kind caused isolation, and individualization.

Parasitism

Full-employment was achieved, at least artificially, during the first five-year plan, and throughout the entirety of the Soviet period all people were supposed to engage in socially useful occupations.\footnote{Madison, "Programs for the Disabled in the Ussr." pp 167-99} Not working under Stalin could mean being charged with wrecking or shirking or a variety of other crimes that marked a socially undesirable. Parasitism, the refusal to work, was specifically made into a crime in the RSFSR in 1961. Any person capable of working who refused to work was leading an anti-social, parasitic way of life, and could be charged under the law. Though this was

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Madison, "Programs for the Disabled in the Ussr." pp 167-99}
first made law under Khrushchev, it expanded as a significant tool of state control under Brezhnev, especially after being put into the Soviet constitution in 1977. Often, dissidents were brought up on charges of parasitism. A person who was critical of the Soviet state might end up losing their job, be bared from getting any other kind of employment, and then charged with parasitism, rather than being more directly charged with a crime like anti-Soviet agitation.

Methods of state control in the Brezhnev era tended to rely less on terror and ideological commitment than on pressure and coercion. People still went to jail, and tanks still rolled into Czechoslovakia, but often, the state controlled people with the threat of losing a good job, a spot in a university, or access to better housing. Isolation and exclusion, or the threat of isolation and exclusion, was more common than imprisonment. As such, the Brezhnev-era Soviet state functioned fundamentally through disability and isolating trauma.

Being placed in an invalid home was, supposedly, a way that the state showed that it met the needs of and provided care for disabled people. At the same time, those same institutions that were so humane for disabled people sometimes served as prisons for abled people. In particular, some dissidents were diagnosed with mental illnesses, especially schizophrenia, and sent to mental hospitals as a form of punishment.¹²⁰ For abled people, this was considered an especially horrible form of abuse by the state, as well as an especially extreme form of isolation. For mentally ill people, however, it was routine and deserved. For abled people, isolation was a means of control, which functioned through being denied access to work as a form of

¹²⁰ Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History."
social participation. For disabled people, who could not work, isolation was a fact of existence.

Supposedly, by the 1970s, the Soviet Union had reached, if not yet Communism, at least the era of ‘Developed Socialism.’ By the point of Developed Socialism, all people should have been incorporated into the Soviet project, and so all anti-social groups and by extension most social problems should have disappeared. In order to maintain an image of Developed Socialism, therefore, the state tended to simply deny that social problem existed rather than trying to solve them. This denial felt, especially for young people, increasingly detached from reality. One of those social problems that was systematically denied was the continued existence of disabled people.

Most abled people did not worry about the disappearance of disabled people. Alla, who appears in the introduction of this thesis, told me that before she herself became disabled, she had not noticed that she never saw disabled people, and did not really think about where they might be. Once, she said, she met a foreigner who told her that he was impressed, because he thought Soviet medicine must be the best in the world, since he never saw any disabled people around. From experience with the Soviet medical system, Alla knew that this was probably not the reason why disabled people were not around, but she did not wonder where they actually were. Disabled people essentially did not seem to exist. When I told people the time frame for this
project, which originally started in the 1980s, people often told me, ‘Well, 30 years ago, there weren’t any disabled people.’

In reality, disabled people certainly existed, but were systematically excluded from Soviet life. When new invalid homes were built in the 1970s, they were built far away from anything else, far out in the middle of nowhere. The conditions in them varied, but even when care was excellent, they were hidden away. Disabled people were usually denied admittance to universities, and very few disabled people, especially Category I disabled people, managed to go. Disabled workers, in the 1970s, were separated from the general workforce, and placed in workplaces specifically for disabled people. For some people, especially blind and deaf groups who created stronger communities in those workplaces, this was a good thing, but it still meant that disabled people were made systematically invisible.

While anti-parasitism laws only applied to people able to work, the idea that disabled people were at least partially choosing not to recover and reintegrate into abled life, or that they were leading an anti-social, parasitic way of life had not really changed that much from the 1930s. What had changed, however, was the idea that all bodies were curable. In an earlier era, disabled people were either good disabled people, in the process of recovering so as to cease being disabled, or bad, isolated disabled people who remained disabled. In the 1970s and 1980s, less effort was put

---

121 Konstantin. Interview by author. (2014, July 17) St. Petersburg, Russia, Katya. Interview by author. (2014, July 18). St. Petersburg, Russia. This is a reference to a statement made in 1980, when the Soviet Union refused to hold the Paralympics that, “There are no invalids in the U.S.S.R!”
123 See: Burch, "Transcending Revolutions: The Tsars, the Soviets and Deaf Culture."
towards rehabilitating or reincorporating disabled people. Disabled people were seen as inherently, physically, slightly parasitic and just a little bit greedy, and so were excluded through many of the same methods used to control dissidents.

Towards the end of the Brezhnev era, the ideology of the Soviet state had stopped being quite so present in people’s lives. Soviet citizens were increasingly jaded, and most people simply wanted to wear jeans and listen to western music. This lack of ideological commitment was especially clear in how people approached labor, largely in that they avoided it as much as possible. Late Brezhnevism developed a culture of avoiding labor. People put off labor as much as possible and only fulfilled production quotas at the last possible minute. Soviet citizens knew not to buy anything made during that last week of frenzy, because it would inevitably be badly made.124

Essentially, while work remained a required form of participation, the actual nature of participation had changed. Physical labor was no longer quite so significant to the meaning of participation in the Soviet community.125 Instead, there was a more fundamental connection between participation, the state, the collective and consumption. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the justification of the Soviet state was increasingly defined through meeting the material needs of its population.126 Brezhnev era consumerism was fundamentally collective, however. When a Brezhnev-era shopper came upon desirable, difficult to find goods, they would buy up all they could and distribute to everyone they knew, with the expectation that those

126 Ibid.
people would do the same in return. Finding enough money to make big purchases was not an issue. When a person’s name finally came up on the waiting list to buy a car, collecting enough money to make the purchase simply involved going around to friends and family until the money was collected.\textsuperscript{127} To participate in this form of consumerism still required having a salary, and so while labor no longer functioned as participation, work did, because a salary did.

For the disaffected youths in rock bands of the late Soviet period, not laboring was an ideological choice rather than a feature of disinterest in Soviet ideology. In order to avoid parasitism charges, rock musicians found jobs in which they did not have to work hard, and which provided as little deeper satisfaction or meaning as possible. The most coveted of this type of non-job job was working as a boiler room attendant.\textsuperscript{128} Viktor Tsoi, the front man of one of the most important Soviet rock bands, Kino, worked in the boiler room of the hotel Kamchatka in Leningrad. Working in a boiler room was a good job, for a disaffected rock star. A boiler room attendant only needed to show up occasionally, and did not need to focus while on the job. As such, it provided room for pursuing other interests and other forms of meaning.\textsuperscript{129}

In 1982, Kino released their first album, \textit{45}, which included the song \textit{Elektrichka}.\textsuperscript{130} The Elektrichka which gives the song its name was a Soviet electrical commuter train, and the song is about Tsoi’s commute to work. The Elektrichka in

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid. p 154.
\textsuperscript{130} Viktor Tsoi, "Elektrichka," in \textit{45} (AnTrop, 1982).
this song is a gloomy, monotonous image, and the song describes a sense of societal emptiness and fear through the image of the commute to work. The lyrics of the song begins:

“Yesterday I went to bed too late. This morning I woke up too early./ Yesterday, I went to bed too late, I barely slept./ I probably should have gone to the doctor this morning./ But now Elektrichka takes me where I do not want to go.”

Tsoi describes the emptiness and hollowness of traveling to job that he does not want to go to in terms of illness. Rather than going to work, this feeling means he should be going to a doctor. This illness, and the helplessness he experiences in being taken to work on the Elektrichka, are tied to participation in a system he does not believe in and feels isolated from. The next verse ends,

“Why do I keep silent? Why do not I shout? I keep silent./ Elektrichka takes me where I do not want to go.”

Not shouting when he feels that he should shout, and going to work when he should go to the doctor function in the same way in the song. Sickness, and the desire to not participate in a system he does not believe in are equated. Both are reasons not to work, and both do not stop the inevitable movement of the train to the place he does not want to go. In this way, Tsoi defines himself as a person whose ideological isolation means that he is sick, and thus cannot work. Since his ideological isolation is constant, he can never work, and he is therefore metaphorically disabled. Unlike a disabled person, Tsoi wants to be isolated from the system, but, being abled, he has to participate. From his experience of isolation, the physical experience of illness is written on to him. By the 1980s, therefore, disability had become an explanatory social concept, and a means of relating to the state.
The song ‘Elektrichka’ is from 1982, but the language of isolation and disability in Kino’s music do not end there. With glasnost, Kino and other Soviet rock bands were able to play more openly and became more widely popular. Kino’s music continued to focus on feelings of ideological isolation, dissatisfaction and the desire for political change through the 1980s. Their use of disability and illness as a metaphor did not end in 1982. For example, Grupa Krovi, Kino’s fifth album, released in 1988 at the height of their popularity, includes the song, ‘Mama, We’ve All Gone Crazy.”

Illness language and illness metaphors were used to define identity as isolated outsider, through the desire to refuse to work and to refuse to participate. Disaffected Soviet youth of the 1980s, therefore, used the metaphor of disability as a way of defining group identity as isolated outsiders.

Conclusion

The legal meaning of disability did not change after 1932. Disability continued to be defined through remaining labor capacity, and continued to place disabled people into categories of ability to work. That categorization system remained in place through the 1990s. In 2014, people continue to define themselves as more or less disabled through their categorization.

The social meaning of disability, however, changed, because the meaning of all of its component parts changed. Over the course of the Soviet period, disability

---

functioned through both a legal meaning, representing disabled people categorized as valuable to the state and deserving of support, and through a broader category of undeserving disabled people. Disability referred to contexts of labor, work, trauma, isolation and participation. All of these aspects of disability functioned in different ways at different times, were emphasized more at different points and less at others. By the end of the Soviet period, they had largely merged into one concept, so that each metaphorically and literally implied the others.

Disability, therefore, is a complex category. It does not exactly relate to the body, but sick and injured bodies are secondarily written back onto contexts of disability. Primarily, however, it refers to how people understood themselves in relation to the state, to community, and in terms of subjective and collective identity. The concepts of disability I have developed in this chapter will remain relevant for the rest of this thesis, and so here I will provide an overview of these terms and concepts as I will be using them:

**Labor** refers to the physical act of labor, separate from the meaning of work. In the early Soviet period, work and labor were interchangeable concepts, in which work meant ‘socially useful labor.’ By the late Soviet period, work and labor were distinct. In the 1990s, labor referred primarily to activity that prevented a person from engaging in leisure. Disability is legally defined through the loss of labor capacity.

**Labor capacity** as a legal category refers to the ability to engage in labor. As a metaphorical and social category, however, disability is defined through **work capacity**, which refers to the ability to work, and particularly the ability to access work. Because work and labor had been interchangeable, when they became
separated, labor capacity remained a fundamental requirement of being able to access work, i.e. disabled people, in being barred from accessing higher education and better jobs because of legal disabled status, were prevented from receiving jobs with higher salaries, central to the meaning of participation in the 1970s. In being separated into different work environments, they were cordoned off from abled forms of work in so far as that referred to collectively not laboring. The inability to access meaningful work, as in the case of disaffected young people of the 1980s, also functioned as disability, and thus as a loss of work or labor capacity.

**Work** refers to forms of social participation. Throughout the Soviet period, social participation was often tied to labor, but work does not necessarily mean labor. In the 1980s, social participation involved having a job, which provided a salary, but *not* engaging in labor. In the 1990s, the meaning of work was fundamentally disrupted.

On a basic level, **trauma** is defined as an experience which changes a person. In the Russian context, specifically, or more broadly in a collectivist context, trauma is understood through the relationship of an individual to the collective. Trauma is when that relationship is altered. Trauma can be divided into two forms, collective or collectivizing and individual or individualizing.

**Collective trauma** is positive trauma, which is not experienced in terms of disability. Collective or collectivizing trauma is a fundamental part of group identity formation, in which shared experience of trauma negates traumatic separation of individual from the community. A collectively traumatized group defines itself as isolated from another community. As such, trauma is a fundamentally political
experience, in which the source of a person’s trauma defines if that trauma will be experienced through isolation or as communal.

The other trauma, **individualizing trauma**, is experienced as disability because it is experienced as isolating. Instead of creating group identity, it individualizes a person, separating that person from the group. Individualizing trauma occurs when a traumatic experience is not taken on by the community, and therefore causes a person to be isolated. It also occurs when a traumatic identity shared by the community is not taken on by an individual. Finally, it is the psychological experience of isolation, so that when a person is unable to access work and becomes isolated, that is experienced as individualizing trauma.

**Meaning** is primarily the opposite of individual trauma, the measure of degree of participation through work or socially useful labor. If a form of labor is ‘meaningless’ or ‘pointless,’ it is not a form of work, and therefore not a means of participating in the community. As such, meaningless ‘work,’ or work made meaningless, is isolating. When isolated, a person does not have access to work and therefore does not have access to meaning. This experience is traumatic.

**Participation** and **isolation** are opposite forms of relating to a community. Isolation is the fact of being separated from the group and results in trauma. The inability to participate in the group creates a break between individual and collective, which is isolation, and therefore trauma. Trauma is the psychological experience resulting from isolation. Participation is the means of being a part of the collective and of avoiding isolation. Without participation, through meaning, a person is isolated, resulting in trauma.
The **body** and **health** are also a part of disability, but primarily as a secondary association. To be isolated and traumatized means not working, not working and being traumatized can indicate a psychological and physical experience.
Motherhood and the Collapse

In September 2014, a Russian livejournal user posted a series of black-and-white pictures of a boy holding a milk jug to the popular Russian livejournal soviet_life, which is a community dedicated to posting images of Soviet experience as it is remembered. The pictures posted by this user, whose name is Dmitri, are identifiable as Soviet because of the style of the boy’s clothes, and the kind of milk can he is holding. The boy looks to be around 12 years old, standing by himself in the middle of an empty, muddy street. Dmitri captioned his post:

“In October 1987, a three-liter can of milk cost (if memory serves me correctly) 60 kopeks, a can of milk for a family of four for a day. Now, years later, I realize we started to drink less milk, which I had not thought about before, but I drink two cups a day, which is less. I do not know why what has interested me in these pictures is the milk can. Primarily I wanted to compare the environmental reality of the street, many years have passed, a dairy store around the corner ceased to exist in 1991, milk cans can now almost not be found, the boys grew up, probably forgot about this street when they moved away, but I did not forget.”

This post reflects a nostalgic memory of 1987. It is tagged as ‘happy childhood,’ though the child in the photo does not seem especially happy. The other photos in the post, which have been photoshopped black-and-white in order to make

---

comparison easier, show the street in 2014. Despite Dmitri’s caption, the street is surprisingly unchanged. The main difference is that in the pictures from 2014, a Toyota Camry is parked where the boy stood in 1987.

The boy in the picture is not Dmitri, and the happy, nostalgic childhood he describes in the post does not reflect his own childhood in the 1980s. I know that because Dmitri is a regular poster to soviet_life. A few months earlier, he posted a series of images, also tagged ‘happy childhood,’ of school children in 1986. Though these photos come from his family’s photo albums, none of the pictures, he says, are of him. On this post, Dmitri writes, “September 1986, the last September I was in school, […] Virtually the entirety of 1985 I spent in the hospital, in the summer of 1986 I improved and went to my school, but in October I had to be airlifted to the regional children’s hospital, and almost never went to school again.”

Soviet_life is filled with images of childhood. Clothing, toys and food are described as bland or bad in order to say something positive, as an image of a purer and better form of childhood, contrasted to the materialistic childhood of the present day. Childhood in the Soviet era is remembered as stable, easy and moral, contrasted to contemporary childhood. This image of happy Soviet childhood is appealing, possible even especially appealing, to people like Dmitri, whose childhood was not happy or easy.

In 1987, when milk was 60 kopecks and this picture of some other child’s happiness was taken, Dmitri was too sick to ever go to school again. Dmitri does not know the boy in the picture, but he grew up on that street while he was sick. Despite his association of 1987 with a ‘happy childhood,’ on his personal blog, Dmitri says that returning to take new pictures in 2014 was upsetting and uncomfortable, because his memories there, on that street in 1987, were so unhappy. Dmitri, in his initial post, placed the period at which his nostalgic image of childhood was disrupted as 1991, rather than at the point of the disruption of his own ‘happy Soviet childhood’ in 1986. In 1991, the milk store ceased to exist, Soviet style milk cans disappeared, and the happy children he presents photos of began to forget about their happy childhood. Dmitri attributes the difficulty of childhood not to his own illness and isolation, but to the instability of the 1990s.

This image of easy, stable Soviet childhood did not originate in 2014 and was not limited to sick children. The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the economic collapse in 1993 produced a great deal of upheaval in Russia. Most Soviet era forms of meaning, institutions and values disappeared. The idea of a Soviet identity and Soviet community also disappeared, replaced with a broad sense of isolation and instability. This loss of the ability to participate, through the loss of a collective to

---

135 The comments on this post are primarily people arguing that milk was never actually only 60 kopecks in 1987
participate in, was attributed to the moral decay introduced along with capitalist consumerism.\textsuperscript{137}

Of those institutions and cultural concepts that were meaningful in the Soviet era, only the family had not collapsed. The family, therefore, was the only remaining stable social unit, and so the work of keeping the family together became the work of preventing the final, total, collapse of Soviet morality. The intact family was protection against chaos, the means by which a person could survive and get through the 1990s.\textsuperscript{138} The upbringing of children was the core and purpose of the Soviet era family, and as such the image of the happy Soviet childhood, free of consumerism and moral corruption that had been introduced by Western goods, was an image of stability in the period of instability. A source of panic of the 1990s was the inability of a mother to provide a stable childhood to her children.

In the Soviet period, raising children was primarily women’s work, and as such in the 1990s, the work of keeping the family together was also women’s work. The purpose of motherhood in the 1990s, however, was fundamentally different from the purpose of motherhood in the Soviet era. Soviet era mothers were expected to raise content citizens and workers, where as mothers of the 1990s provided stability against the pressure of the Soviet collapse. As such, the place of childhood for a disabled child in the 1990s also fundamentally changed. Dmitri, in 1987, experienced the Soviet disabled childhood. It was medicalized, it was institutional and it was isolated. As such, his childhood was traumatic. In the 1990s, institutional childhood

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid. p 167.
was no longer available, and disabled children began to move into the home, becoming their own form of morally urgent work.

The 1990s were a period of drastic change in Russia. They were also a period of suffering, described as traumatic. The difficulty of the 1990s was especially pronounced for disabled people, especially disabled children, and others who relied on Soviet era welfare programs for survival. Outside of the family, there was no place for disabled children. Nevertheless, raising a disabled child was, at times, considered an improper form of participation, a pointless waste of limited resources. Further, the family remained a discreet unit apart from any other form of community. For disabled women and children in particular, being confined to the domestic space was isolating.

The Happy Soviet Childhood

After the revolution, the Bolsheviks hoped that at some point they would be able to get rid of the family as a social unit. The oppression of women was a microcosm or parallel of the class system, and functioned through the confinement of women to the domestic sphere. Liberating women from the family and incorporating them into the work force would help to dismantle the old order and allow women to develop class consciousness. The question, though, of what to do about women was complicated. Primarily, it was complicated by children.

Children, in the context of the ‘women question’ existed as a problem in need of solving. Without women in the domestic sphere, it was unclear who would do domestic labor, and who would raise children. While the Bolsheviks thought of giving birth as a part of women’s social role, they focused primarily on women’s role as workers instead. They hoped that taking on the work of motherhood would mean that women workers would be encouraged to have more children, that if women did not have to do the work of motherhood they would be more likely to become mothers while still working. There were problems, however, with this approach. It did not seem possible or acceptable to simply take children away from mothers, and especially during the period of NEP, they simply did not have the funds to fully take over for the family.

Complicating the question of what to do with children as well was the presence of a large number of homeless orphans, called besprizorniki, after the First World War and the Russian Civil War. These children were resistant to having their living conditions improved at the cost of losing their total freedom, and as such their care posed a difficult problem for the revolutionary state. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks saw them as a potential ideal of childhood. With besprizorniki, the Bolsheviks could introduce institutional childhood, childhood entirely outside of the family. Children, for the Bolsheviks, held a great deal of metaphorical and ideological

---

142 Natalia Chernayeva, "Childcare Manuals and Construction of Motherhood in Russia 1890-1990" Diss. (University of Iowa, 2009), pp 20-81.
significance. Children represented the future of the revolution, the new generation that would inevitably triumph over the old.\footnote{See: Loraine de la Fe, "Empire's Children: Soviet Childhood in the Age of Revolution" Diss. (Florida International University, 2013).} They were ideologically pure, and through education in socialism could be molded into ideal revolutionaries.

The Bolsheviks also tended to employ the image of a ‘happy childhood’ as something uniquely Soviet. Where as in capitalist societies bourgeois children had spoiled, consumerist childhoods while worker children lived in misery, the possibility of a happy childhood for all children indicated that the Soviet Union was a truly classless society.\footnote{Starks, "A Fertile Mother Russia: Pronatalist Propaganda in Revolutionary Russia." pp 411-42.} Fully meeting the needs of children was therefore extremely ideological important to the Bolsheviks, but how they conceived of those needs was complex. Education, even in the context of famine, was paramount, but education also included meeting the physical needs of children and making them healthier.\footnote{Kirschenbaum, Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia. pp pp 89-133.}

Childhood was a Bolshevik modernization project. With the ideological meaning of childhood well-being, children made healthier through medical science was an indication of modernization.\footnote{Hoffman, Cultivating the Masses. pp 125-181.} For that reason, especially in the 1920s, the state became increasingly involved in motherhood, which also became increasingly medicalized. State programs of infant health focused on eliminating traditional unscientific practices of pregnancy, childbirth and infant care by presenting them as the cause of high infant mortality rates.\footnote{Starks, "A Fertile Mother Russia: Pronatalist Propaganda in Revolutionary Russia." pp 411-42} It became increasingly impossible to give
birth and raise a child without somehow being involved in the Soviet healthcare system, a trend which continued and increased in the 1930s, though in a different form and for different reasons.\textsuperscript{149}

Creating a healthy Soviet childhood required defining the healthy child. As such, in the early 1920s, the Soviet state established norms of childhood health and development, defining which babies were sick and which were healthy.\textsuperscript{150} Lev Vygotsky invented this system of classification, which became the Soviet science of defectology.\textsuperscript{151}

Children, lacking work capacity, were not categorized as disabled in the Soviet Union until the 1970s.\textsuperscript{152} In the 1920s, they were instead described in terms of the alternate category of ‘defektiv’. Children were assessed by doctors to mark them as normal, or to place them in three categories of ‘defective children’.\textsuperscript{153} Those categories were moral, physical and mental defectiveness. Each category was determined through a different kind of assessment and necessitated a different treatment. Mental defectiveness was measured through IQ tests, and necessitated placement in bordering schools for defective children. Physical defectiveness was measured through normative standards of physical development and necessitated

\textsuperscript{150} Hoffman, Cultivating the Masses. pp125-181.
\textsuperscript{152} Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History."
\textsuperscript{153} Hoffman, Cultivating the Masses. pp 125-181.
placement in hospital-type institutional care. Moral defectiveness meant the refusal to participate, and necessitated placement in reform school.\textsuperscript{154}

Vygotsky’s work privileged reincorporating defective children back into society, through determining what children were rehabilitatable and which were not. Children who were assessed to educable, who could be medically treated and recreated into normative models of childhood, underwent intensive medical intervention. For these children, defectology was quite effective at fulfilling its stated goal of reincorporating children deemed defective yet educable into Soviet society.\textsuperscript{155} Children deemed uneducable, however, were largely neglected.\textsuperscript{156}

Just after the revolution, women’s main form of social participation had been as workers. In the 1930s, the purpose of childhood changed from modernization to the mobilization of a work force. As such, the focus of women’s role in society changed significantly, with Stalin’s pro-natalist campaign of the 1930s. Abortion was outlawed, and there was an increased focus on women’s role and responsibility to society as mothers. This role was complicated, however, and dualistic. The image of the ‘happy mother’ of this era required women to give birth to children, raise those children and work.\textsuperscript{157}

In general in the 1930s, the state stressed the significance of the family as a moral and social obligation, primarily as a stable space in which to raise children into


\textsuperscript{156} Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History."

\textsuperscript{157} Hoffman, \textit{Cultivating the Masses}. pp125-181.
productive workers. At the same time that abortion was outlawed divorce was made significantly more difficult. Emphasis was also placed on men’s obligation to fulfill paternal responsibilities, though not with the same ideological weight placed on women’s maternal obligations. Women were able to name men as the fathers of their children without the man’s presence so long as she could provide evidence of cohabitation. Child support payments were increased and so was the penalty for non-payment.

In the 1920s, motherhood was expected to be collective. Women were supposed to create communities for the collective raising of children, which would ideally reduce their individual maternal duties. In the late 1930s and 1940s, there was increasing focus on the responsibility of individual parents to raise their children into workers and Soviet citizens, as a part of their role in society. The family, however, was not conceived of as a solitary unit, but as part of the collective. The state was increasingly involved in the family, and diminished its authority over the raising of children if not its role in childrearing. The state used increasingly coercive methods to get parents to participate in childcare education programs. Teachers and state run children’s organization like the Komosomol and Young Pioneers became a significant part of a child’s upbringing and education.

---

158 Ibid. pp 125-181.
160 Kirschenbaum, Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia. pp 89-133.
161 Hoffman, Cultivating the Masses. pp 125-183.
also established laws by which children could be permanently removed from parents in cases of neglect or insufficient fulfillment of parental duties.

There was also a significant change in the meaning of the sick and healthy child. Defectology of the 1920s was thrown out, replaced with a new science of pedology. The idea of defective children no longer fit with Stalinist conception of childhood. All children were treated as in need of improvement. The state eliminated well-baby clinics and began to assess all children in terms of potential illness. The idea of defectology that there existed a limited window of opportunity for raising a child was instead replaced with a new conception of childhood development, that any child could be educated and incorporated into the workforce. All children went through intensive moral education, and all children were expected to be fit into norms of childhood development. When a child failed to do so, the blame for this failure was placed on insufficient motherhood.

Stalinism recreated the family as a significant social unit, but not an isolated one. Instead, the family was a space through which to fulfill the obligation to the state by having and raising children into Stalinist citizens. In order to mobilize a work force, and particularly a future work force, women’s role was repositioned as both mother and worker. Men’s social role was more specifically as workers, and the role in the family of mothers and fathers was not treated interchangeably.

---

During and after the Second World War, the purpose of motherhood and the family changed again. Single adults and couples with fewer than three children were required to pay a tax. The title of mother-hero was created for mothers of ten or more children, and state provided some economic and social support for single mothers. At the same time, there was also a legal strengthening of the institution of marriage. A legal distinction was introduced between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ children, paternity could no longer be listed for children born to unwed mothers, and only married fathers had any kind of economic paternal responsibilities. The focus of all of these policies was repopulation. Because so many men had been killed in the war, these policies required men to marry and have children, but also encouraged them to have children out of wedlock by reducing the potential risks to the family of children born from extra-martial affairs.\textsuperscript{168}

After Stalin’s death in 1953, Khrushchev began a process of de-Stalinization of childhood and education. At first, this involved the reintroduction of emphasis on institutional childhood as a Soviet ideal. More orphanages and homes for children, both abled and disabled, were established, and new boarding schools were built. The concept of defectology returned, and again certain children were assessed as defective and placed in institutional care.\textsuperscript{169} Soviet citizens, however, became less trusting of state institutions of childhood during this period, and as such programs of state childhood were slowly eliminated. However, for children who did not fit into norms

of childhood, meaning both disabled and gifted children, boarding schools remained.⁷⁰

Housing reforms had a significant impact on the meaning of the family. Through the private home, the family became an individual unit, and by extension, the process of raising a child became matter.⁷¹ Childhood, however, remained ideologically weighted. Children continued to be used as evidence of classless Soviet society through the image of the ‘happy Soviet child.’ This also meant a change in the meaning of childhood. The purpose became less the mobilization and creation of a labor force, and instead, the happy child was a means of justifying the Soviet project.⁷² A central promise of the Soviet state in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, was that childhood in the Soviet Union would be safe, happy and easy.⁷³

The role of women became more complex. The happy Soviet childhood was provided to children in the context of the family unit, a part of society somewhat separated from the state. Women’s roles as mothers and men’s roles as fathers were still not treated interchangeably. More importance was placed on women’s role as mothers. Under Stalin, women’s dual roles were unified, in that women were required

---

to be both mothers and workers simultaneously. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s women had two roles, as mothers and then also as workers. The impossibility of filling both was a source of controversy and a social problem that tended to be avoided.  

Women’s role as mother came to be seen as an inherent and natural feature of womanhood. Women were ‘naturally’ the emotional and moral care giver of the family. Children, in advice literature of the 1960s and 1970s were often treated as an extension of the mother’s body. A child’s poor health was attributed to the mother’s poor health.  

Men’s role as fathers, on the other hand, was largely economic rather than moral and natural. There was not an equivalent collection of advice literature on proper forms of fatherhood.

The narrative of Soviet childhood of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s focused on a child’s happiness and satisfaction, as made possible by mothers. This image of the happy child as women’s role was part also of an increasing Soviet-style consumerism, in which an important duty of the state was to provide the material items of happy childhood, which then would be acquired by proper mothers. As such, Soviet childhood, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, was tied to a particular aesthetic and a particular set of required possessions, which were often not available to most

175 Specifically through smoking, drinking, prior health problems, Chernayeva, "Childcare Manuals and Construction of Motherhood in Russia 1890-1990." pp 206-257.
people. Families who did not have much money or access to goods would nevertheless spend lavishly on their children.

While women were also required to work, the image of the woman in the home was an important part of the image of the Brezhnev era childhood. Often child-rearing advice was written and directed towards ‘stay-at-home mothers,’ even though staying at home only was not an option for women.\textsuperscript{179} The Khrushchev era and Brezhnev era image of the private apartment focused on the material necessities for women to provide their children with a safe, happy and even fun childhood. Men’s role in the family was primarily as provider, but much of this work was also expected to be done by the state, which created the economic and social conditions of consumption. The rest of the work of raising the child within the private family was placed on women.

The 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were also an era of increased stratification between the lives of abled children and disabled children. Testing on children to assess them through normative models of development increased and became increasingly arbitrary. While the focus of abled childhood was on happiness, this was not a feature of the disabled childhood at all. It was largely impossible to raise a disabled child at home, though many women did try.\textsuperscript{180}

Institutional childhood for disabled children was heavily medicalized, with a focus on raising educable disabled children into workers.\textsuperscript{181}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{180} Katya. Interview by author. (2014, July 18). St. Petersburg, Russia
\textsuperscript{181} Aleksei. Interview by author. (2014, July 31). St. Petersburg, Russia
\end{flushright}
on raising a child did not include the option of raising a disabled child. In the 1970s and early 1980s, pressure to institutionalized disabled children increased as children’s disability or defectiveness was blamed on women’s improper motherhood. There are stories from this era of women being told to give up disabled children, especially children with Down’s Syndrome, immediately at birth, before they have the chance to see or hold the child, so as to avoid forming emotional attachments.182 Women trying to raise a disabled child at home were often told they were selfish, placing their own attachments to the child above the child’s well-being or the well-being of society. It was assumed a mother could not raise a disabled child into a worker on her own, that the state would do a better job repairing what was considered broken.183

1970s-era defectology also increased the division between children deemed educable and uneducable. Children deemed uneducable were increasingly neglected, often given no education at all, before being sent to a home for disabled adults, wherein neglect only increased.184 Disabled children who could not be raised into workers were simply not raised, and women who tried to raise a disabled child at home were considered to be wasting resources, their own labor, and were damaging the potential of the child to become a worker.

The requirements of motherhood in this era were extensive. Criticism by women of the Soviet state focused often on the impossibility of Soviet motherhood, of women’s triple burden, which required constant labor.185 While there were a

---

182 Katya. Interview by author. (2014, July 18). St. Petersburg, Russia
185 Buckley, Perestroika and Soviet Women. pp 191-224.
variety of models on how, exactly, to raise a child, all of them placed strong emphasis on the importance of a child’s normative development on strict models. Mothers were required to make sure that children followed specific norms of development. Failing to do so indicated that a woman was a bad mother, which could result in the removal of a child by the State.\textsuperscript{186}

As such, disabled motherhood was particularly difficult. Institutionalized disabled women were entirely isolated and neglected, and were not able to raise children. For women with limited energy or mobility, it was possible, but difficult to fulfill the requirements of motherhood. At the same time, while the image of an ideal mother was necessarily an abled mother,\textsuperscript{187} disabled women could potentially receive care and economic support from the state, which enable them to be mothers, even stay-at-home mothers.\textsuperscript{188} Some mothers classified as disabled also potentially had more access to motherhood as a form of participation than others. For example, a woman I spoke to, Katya, said that when she was a child in the 1960s, her mother had been blind. Because her mother worked at a factory for blind workers, she had hardly thought of her mother as disabled.

Disabled fatherhood was less possible, because the work of fatherhood was fundamentally different. Pensions for disabled parents, both mothers and fathers, were paid out to children, often more reliably than pensions for disabled children

\begin{footnotes}
\item[188] Alla. Interview by author. (2014, July 21). St. Petersburg, Russia
\end{footnotes}
themselves. As such, because the work of fatherhood was economic, in the case of a disabled father, the state took over the work of fatherhood.

After 1986 and *glasnost*, one of the central criticisms of the Soviet system that arose was that Soviet childhood was not happy. Critics often pointed out that Soviet young people were distinctly unhappy, and dissatisfied. A sense of moral decay and societal crisis, presented through social problems facing young people, caused a reassessment of the fundamental promises of the Soviet state. The role of women was central to this criticism. The idea that the Soviet state prevented women from fulfilling their ‘natural role’ as mothers, by placing additional burdens of labor on them, was widespread.

In ‘Cuckoo-Mothers and Apparatchiks: Glasnost and Children’s Homes,” Elizabeth Waters describes reports on the state of children’s homes in 1987 through 1991, primarily from the journal *Kommunist*. In 1987, journalists described the poor conditions of children’s homes as shocking, and used the presence of children in those homes as evidence of the moral degradation of society. Many children in those homes were social orphans, which meant that they had been given over to the state by living parents, or had been taken from negligent parents. Journalists focused particularly on the fact that the children’s mothers were alive, and those women were, in 1987 at least, largely blamed and vilified for giving up their children.

These women were called ‘cuckoo mothers’, ‘cuckoo’ because they acted unnaturally as improper mothers. They were considered selfish, a drain on society. This story was considered a particularly shocking one: one alcoholic mother had

---

189 Dunn, "The Disabled in Russia in the 1990s." pp 153-73.
supposedly given birth to 13 ‘sub-normal’ children due to her alcoholism, and then
had given them over to be raised by the state. The poor quality of institutional care for
institutionalized children was blamed on such women, sick women and their sick
children, for creating additional economic burdens to state care. The alcoholic
woman’s selfishness in having children, the burden of providing care for her disabled
children, were the reason for the limited staff and limited funds available to provide
appropriate care of abled orphans, considered more deserving.¹⁹¹

Over time, however, that blame shifted to the state, for creating the conditions
in which mothers were forced to make the unnatural choice of giving up a child,
because it had failed to fulfill its paternalistic role in providing the economic and
social stability required for women to raise children. In requiring women to work, the
state had left women too exhausted to be able to perform their fundamental and
natural social role as mother. In this argument, the problem of institutional childhood
remained the problem of the institutionalized abled child, and the disabled child
ceased to be so relevant. After this change in the meaning of the forms of social
participation required of women, which resulted in an essentially exclusive focus on
women’s role as mothers, there was a widespread campaign for the
deinstitutionalization of abled social orphans.¹⁹² No such campaign existed for the

¹⁹¹ Elizabeth Waters, ”’Cuckoo Mothers’ and ’Apparatchiks’: Glasnost and
Children’s Homes,” in Perestroika and Soviet Women, ed. Mary
¹⁹² See: Cassandra Hartblay, ”An Absolutely Different Life: Locating Disability,
Motherhood and Local Power in Rural Siveria” (Macalester College, 2006).
deinstitutionalization of the disabled children, and the pressure on women to give up a
disabled child at birth remained.\footnote{\textit{It still remains, See: "Abandoned by the State: Violence, Neglect and Isolation for Children with Disabilities in Russian Orphanages,"} \url{http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/russia0914_ForUpload.pdf.}}

The place and meaning of the family in Soviet society changed drastically
over the course of the Soviet period. Women had a dual role throughout the Soviet
period, with varying degrees of emphasis placed on their role as mothers or their roles
as workers. In the 1930s, the place of the ideal childhood moved from state
institutions into the family, but the family was not an isolated unit, separate from the
state or collective. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the family became a private unit, in
which women raised children. In order to fulfill the Soviet promise of a happy
childhood, the state provided the stability and the material goods required, but the rest
of the work of motherhood was done by women. By the beginning of the 1980s,
women had to fulfill a largely impossible set of competing responsibilities, as both
workers and mothers. The image of the happy childhood was an image of the degree
of a woman’s participation. Concerns about moral decay and the collapse of
motherhood and the family were turned into fundamental critiques of the state. The
unhappy child, then, became an image of lost stability.

At the same time, the value of the work of motherhood as a form of
meaningful work was based in the future role in Soviet soviet of the child. The goal
and purpose of childhood was in creating the next generation of Soviet citizens. Ideal
Soviet citizenship was dependent on participation, and not working was not
participation. As such, a child who would grow into a disabled adult was not a child
that could expect a ‘happy Soviet childhood.’ The labor of raising a disabled child, whether done by the state or by a mother, was considered a waste of labor, because it would not produce a working citizen. In the 1990s, however, the purpose and role of the family, and the work of motherhood, changed. The Soviet state was gone, and so raising a child into a contributing Soviet citizen was no longer meaningful.

The Unhappy Post-Soviet Child

I met Nataliya in Moscow in the summer of 2014. Nataliya now works for a non-profit called Downside Up, which provides support to families of children with Down’s Syndrome. In 1993, Nataliya was looking for a job. For most of her life, she had worked as a translator, most recently for an electronics manufactory. Then, in early 1991, she got sick. Her doctors determined that her illness was terminal. She spent the next two years in and out of hospitals, going through the Soviet medical system as it, and the Soviet Union, collapsed around her. Miraculously, in 1993, she recovered. When she decided to go back to work, her old job no longer seemed sufficient. Now, Nataliya wanted to do something meaningful.

Nataliya was not the only person who changed careers in 1993. Quite a lot of people did. Some of them, like Nataliya, were looking for work, that would provide a deeper sense of satisfaction, and some kind of meaning in the sudden absence of the Soviet project. Most people, however, had simply lost their jobs, because of the economic crash in 1992 and 1993. That crash was caused by Shock Therapy,

---

194 Nataliya. Interview by author. (2014, June 17) Moscow, Russia
Yeltsin’s economic reforms, which involved the sudden switch to a market economy through the release of price controls, immediate trade liberalization and privatization.195 Shock therapy was supposed to cause a short period of economic hardship, and then rapid recovery, but the period of economic hardship lasted for the rest of the 1990s. Hyperinflation wiped out people’s life savings, millions of people lost their jobs, and even people who kept their jobs were often not being paid. Shock therapy was devastating for most people.196

Within a general collapse of society, the loss of connection to a collective, people were isolated. Thus, in the 1990s, nearly everyone was unable to engage in meaningful occupation. Nearly everyone was an outsider unable to reintegrate themselves into society, or into collective project. During the Soviet period, these things defined disability, but in the 1990s, they defined society.

The need to maintain the integrity of the family, in this context, only became more urgent. Without the Soviet collective, or the Soviet state, the family was essentially the only societal institution that remained intact. Rather being a means by which children were raised into citizens, the post-Soviet Russian family was the only moral center and system of social support available. That is not to say that the family was the only form of Soviet-era participation that continued to be possible in the 1990s. Other forms of community continued to exist, including friend’s networks and workers collectives. Some women still had jobs. The family, however, had moral

significance that these other forms of community and other forms of participation had lost. 197

In the 1990s, paid labor was no longer a form of work. Participation in capitalism meant giving up Soviet values of community and collective. A few people had done so and had become rich in the 1990s at the expense of the rest of society, and those people were widely hated. As such, having and making money required greed and was destructive to the collective. Work, and participation outside of the specific space of the family, did not contribute to a broader community or a broader project as it had in the Soviet period. Instead, it was an expression of self-interest, both isolated and isolating to others.

Previously, Nataliya had found meaningfulness simply through having a job. As I have argued, however, by the end of the Soviet period, the place of meaning for women had become, primarily, the family. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the family, as the only form of stability available, was now the only source of meaning available. In the 1990s, work did not create and preserve a stable social unit. It was not a bulwark against chaos or collapse, and so it was no longer meaningful.

In Crisis and the Everyday in Post-Socialist Moscow, Olga Shevchenko says that the significance of the family in the 1990s came from the fact that there was a sense of crisis in the political and economic spheres of society. The private family therefore served as a source of stable connection through kinship ties. The family remained stable because it was divided off from the instability of the other spheres of

197 Shevchenko, Crisis and the Everyday in Post-Socialist Moscow. pp 92-96.
Russian society. The family was a source of stable identity and a stable form of access to work.\footnote{Ibid. pp 110-111.}

In the 1980s, there was a sense of the impossibility and crisis of family and motherhood because the state had failed in its role of creating the conditions for mothers to raise children, making motherhood impossible. In the 1990s, the state had withdrawn and the conditions of childhood were significantly worse.\footnote{Eric Shiraev,"Gender Roles and Political Transformation," in The Russian Transformation ed. Eric Shiraev Betty Glad(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).} Men, as well, were largely absent, or were considered to be absent, and the work of preserving the family was entirely women’s work.

Women, through their still-stable identity as mothers, were able to work to create the conditions of stable Soviet childhood despite the broader context of instability, and so the preservation of the family became a moral duty, a means of combatting rising instability. The purpose of the post-Soviet family was therefore quite different from the Soviet family. In Crisis and the Everyday in Post-Socialist Moscow, women focused on the fact of a child’s danger and the need to provide for and protect a child, rather than on the child’s potential future.\footnote{Shevchenko, Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow. pp. 93-94.} As such, the central purpose of the post-Soviet family was the preservation of the family as a context of stability, in which women participated against their own self-interest, for the interest of a child.

Nataliya’s illness had changed her relationship with what counted as meaningful. She said that she was interested in working for other people, on creating positive changes in other people’s lives as a form of meaning. This too, was a means
of combatting the self-interest of the 1990s, which was blamed for creating the isolating conditions of instability.

Nataliya ultimately found meaningfulness through working with disabled children, something she had not considered doing before becoming sick. She found this work through a friend of hers. That friend worked at one of the first inclusive schools\(^{201}\) in Russia that accepted children with Down’s Syndrome. She introduced Nataliya to an American named Paul. Paul had moved to Russia with a daughter with Down’s Syndrome, and was looking to create more inclusive schools in Russia, so that she could have a place in Russian society. He needed a translator.

Nataliya met Paul for the first time at his apartment in Moscow in October, 1993. He had stacks and stacks of pamphlets, in English and German, laid out for her to translate into Russian. The pamphlets compared the lives of children with Down’s Syndrome in Russia, Germany and England, and what Nataliya read as she translated shocked her. She said that it seemed to her that Russia was 20 to 30 years behind the rest of the world. She had not thought about the lives of disabled children much before that, but after, the work of providing care for disabled children became meaningful to her.

In the 1990s, mothers of disabled children also came to see raising a disabled child as a meaningful form of social participation. The disabled child was suddenly recognized as a central part of the family. Without the Soviet era focus on raising children into workers, raising a disabled child, for their mothers, became the most heroic form of keeping a family together, the height of sacrifice for the cause of

\(^{201}\) A school which accepts both abled and disabled children
preventing societal collapse. In the 1990s, keeping a seriously disabled child at home started to slowly became possible, largely because of organized groups of mothers of disabled children calling for support, for whom this work was now morally urgent. Most disabled children’s rights organizations of the 1990s were started by mothers.\textsuperscript{202}

Organizations like the St. Petersburg mothers organization GAOORDI\textsuperscript{203} began pushing for the rights of women to care for disabled children living at home beginning in the 1990s. The work of these groups changed the lives of disabled children remarkably. Nataliya said that the conditions of childhood for disabled children across Russia varied drastically, both in the 1990s and in the present day, dependent on how mobilized and organized mothers of disabled children were from city to city. In some places, children with Down’s syndrome were being incorporated into inclusive schools, while in others, children with Down Syndrome were not even able to attend schools for disabled children.

In the 1990s, motherhood, in general, was difficult. Most women lost much of their economic support, as state support for families withdrew. At the same time, the gap in access to motherhood for women with disabled children or abled children narrowed, because of newly available support organizations for mothers of disabled children. This support was provided not by the state, but typically by abled mothers of abled children, and women like Nataliya who regarded the work of support for mothers of disabled children as meaningful labor.

\textsuperscript{202} And some fathers, like Paul, but mostly when the organization is started by a father it is an American, or German NGO, started by an immigrant parent trying to figure out what to do with a disabled child. FIX

\textsuperscript{203} GAORDI stands for Городская ассоциация общественных объединений родителей детей-инвалидов (city association of public organizations of parents of disabled children)
Other Women’s Families

In broader society, the Soviet mentality that raising a disabled child was selfish had not disappeared. There was often a sense that mothers were at fault for having a disabled child, that their children were disabled because they were alcoholics, which made them selfish. Sometimes mothers of abled children, when they saw a mother with her disabled child, would go up to that mother and tell her things like, “I’m not an alcoholic, so my child is healthy. If you are a bad mother and had this sick child, why should you get this pension and this support from the government, when I need that money for my child too?”\footnote{Katya. Interview by author. (2014, July 18). St. Petersburg, Russia} State support for mothers of disabled children was limited, but some mothers of abled children saw even this support as an unjustifiable drain on limited resources. Rather than being an image of meaningfulness and stability, as they were for Nataliya, mothers of disabled children, as well as the children themselves, were a destabilizing force, contributing to the crisis and decay in Russian society.

For many abled mothers of abled children, motherhood of a disabled child remained an improper form of participation. Mothers in the 1990s were working against the instability of general society as their form of participation, creating conditions of stability for their own children. This work was counter to self-interest, through its care of a child, and therefore served as a means of combating the source of broader social instability. Keeping the family together was a form of providing
stability, against the chaos of the 1990s, but the family was an isolated unit. Women looked out for their own child, and it was not possible to care for another woman’s child.

In the 1990s, in the absence of men and in the absence of the state, women did the work of keeping the family together entirely on their own. Women primarily worked with other women, particularly older women in their families, to do this work.205 Older women sometimes provided economic support for the family through their pensions, and often helped preserve the family through economic hardship, with their knowledge and experience of how to get by in times of poverty. The family was a network of women, and a form of participation only for women.

In the 1990s, motherhood required the constant work and sacrifice of women.206 The mother in the 1990s needed to be able to support the family entirely on her own to work to preserve society. In that context, working for the support of another family was in some ways an insufficient form of motherhood, because it meant not being able to fully provide for the needs one’s own child. Proper motherhood required sacrifice for the protection and preservation of a woman’s own child to the extent that there would be no time or energy available for the care of another woman’s child. As such, proper motherhood required a form of self-interest, but on the behalf of one’s family rather than for oneself.

The work of motherhood, despite the isolation of individual families, remained communal work through a community of participating mothers who worked

205 Shevchenko, Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow.
to preserve the family as a moral, stable unit against the crisis of the 1990s. Other mothers participated in that community through the preservation of their own families. So long as other women worked to preserve their own families and did not prevent one’s own work of motherhood or create further conditions of instability, their work was communal through its opposition to isolation. Women who did threaten the stability of another woman’s family, however, were not participating in this community. 207

In Crisis and the Everyday in Post-Socialist Moscow, Shevchenko says that women noted the irony that, while the family as a social unit was a source of moral meaning and identity for most women, the most hated group of people, considered the source of the destruction of the community and of morality was also called The Family. This meaning of ‘The Family’ refers to the Yeltsin family, the collection of oligarchs, along with Yeltsin’s daughter, who ran the country while Yeltsin was sick, and were considered to have stolen away most of the Russian economy. Shevchenko reports that a women whom she spoke to said that while she could not imagine herself engaging in that same sort of corruption, “we all fend for our families.” Nevertheless in her presentation of herself as a mother fending for her own child, she explicitly separates herself from the corrupted form of family, that involved “walking on people’s heads to get to the goal.” 208 The difference between the proper form of moral family and the corrupt and hated form of family represented by the Yeltsin’s was whether or not it contributed to the isolation of others.

207 Shevchenko, Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow. pp 92-96.  
208 Ibid. p 167.
Mothers of disabled children were also seen as an improper, destructive form of family, in the same way that the Yeltsin family was. While the idea of removing a woman’s access to motherhood generally was considered destructive to the family, this was not the case for removing access to motherhood as meaningful work for mothers of disabled children. By having a disabled child, mothers were contributing to the chaos of the 1990s through requiring additional economic support, which abled mothers of abled children considered to have been taken from them, making their own work of motherhood more difficult. Abled mothers of abled children, therefore, tended to view the mothers of disabled children as outsiders to their form of communal, stabilizing motherhood.

Meaningful motherhood

For women like Nataliya, providing support to mothers of disabled children was a form of participation. Typically, there was a reason that these women regarded the motherhood of disabled children as meaningful. In Nataliya’s case, this was because of her own experience with a long term, supposedly terminal illness, and therefore because of her experience as a disabled mother. When she had been sick, she was a working age woman, who had not been able to work and who thought she would die before growing old. Her relationship with what counted as meaningful labor changed when she recovered, and ceased to be disabled.

Another woman I spoke to, Katya, who now works at the St. Petersburg Early Intervention Institute, had been a doctor in the 1980s, but had not worked with
disabled children. In fact, in medical school, she had been specifically told not to spend too much effort and resources on disabled patients, since to do so would be a waste.

Then, in the early 1990s, she had a difficult pregnancy, and knew that there was a distinct possibility that when her son was born, he would be disabled. While she was pregnant, she knew that, if he were disabled, she would want to raise him at home. She tried to find information and resources that would help her figure out what that would entail, and realized that there was no easily accessible information or support available for women like her. Her son, when he was born, was healthy, but she did not stop thinking of herself as the potential mother of a disabled child. For that reason, while her son was still a baby, she decided to fill the gap she had found in support and information for mothers of disabled children. She saw her own son in the disabled children she worked with and herself in their mothers. She approached care of families with disabled children as if they were her own family.

Katya’s focus, in her work, was on changing the location of the upbringing of disabled children from hospitals to homes. Parents of disabled children often came to her with expectation that she would cure their children, and she thought of the most important part of her work as helping them understand themselves as the parents of a disabled child. Often, other doctors that she knew of focused on treating the bodies of disabled children to the point of being cruel. Katya wanted to make the lives of

---

209 Katya. Interview by author. (2014, July 18). St. Petersburg, Russia
210 she told the story of a seeing a fellow doctor trying to get a very young girl to lift her head, by placing her on a spiky, uncomfortable surface. The little girl could not raise her head, and was simply lying on the surface and sobbing, which
disabled children better and easier instead. Often, the parents of the children she worked with had never been taught how to play with their children, or how to hold their children. Her purpose and her approach centered around creating a space for the disabled child in the family, and building a family around disabled children.

Katya and Nataliya focused very specifically on working for deinstitutionalization. Nataliya worked to create places for the education of disabled children outside of institutions, while Katya worked to create space for disabled children in the family. Katya responded negatively to my question about if she ever worked with institutionalized children, children without families. Sometimes, she said, she worked at schools for disabled children, but only with children who lived at home. The purpose of her work was on treating families, and creating families. The idea that she would work in an institution for disabled children was insulting. Working in an institution only would have served to further disrupt families of disabled children.

For most of the Soviet period, the quality of life for disabled children in institutions varied drastically between different institutions, but in general, it was not drastically worse, and was sometimes actually much better, than the quality of life for children in similar institutions in the United States and Western Europe. By the 1990s, however, those institutions were essentially unliveable. The had relied on state subsidies to function, and during shock therapy funding disappeared.\textsuperscript{211} Even in orphanages for abled children, many children died from neglect in the 1990s.

\textsuperscript{211} Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History."
Institutions for disabled children were even worse. There was no money to pay for staff, or even basic necessities including food. Even in some of the best institutions, children died of starvation.\textsuperscript{212} In the 1990s, outside of the family, there was no system of social support for disabled children whatsoever. While it became increasingly possible for disabled children to live at home, it also became increasingly impossible for them to live anywhere else.\textsuperscript{213}

In the 1990s, according to Katya, women approached medical care skeptically. Care of a disabled child had, for most of the Soviet period, existed primarily in a medicalized environment. For other forms of medical care, women tended to seek out multiple doctors and forms of medicine, relying primarily on the knowledge of their mothers, mothers-in-law and other older female family members. This form of shared women’s knowledge in the absence of men and the state was significant to the family as a form of community in the 1990s. Women, who preserved the family as a form of participation, could do so with no outside help.

In the case of disabled children, this sharing of knowledge was more difficult. The purpose of childhood no longer meant raising a citizen, and so the work of raising a disabled child was no longer considered pointless. However, the knowledge of motherhood of older women tended not to include disabled children. The availability of knowledge and support to allow mothers of disabled children to access motherhood was therefore unavailable. Women like Nataliya and Katya worked to fill this role instead, providing a network of support for women that they had some

\textsuperscript{212} ibid.
\textsuperscript{213} See: Hartblay, "An Absolutely Different Life: Locating Disability, Motherhood and Local Power in Rural Siveria."
reason to see as similar to their own family. As such, they created an alternate community of mothers of disabled children.

The Isolated Family

The lack of social support outside of the context of the family put particular pressure on disabled mothers. I met Alla at her wheelchair dance class in St. Petersburg. For most of her life, Alla had been a dancer and dance teacher, but the class at which I met her was one of the first wheelchair dance lessons she had attended, in 20 years of using a wheelchair. Alla became disabled, she said, at the worst possible time. In the mid 1990s, Alla had needed surgery on her spine. The post-Socialist medical system in Russia was ill-equipped to help her. The hospital where she had her surgery could not even provide her pain medication, and the surgery itself was botched, so that afterwards Alla could no longer walk. The dance school that she worked for gave her a job as an administrator, but that meant she was paid less. Being disabled is expensive. It comes with a lot of big costs and an endless number of little ones. On top of that, Alla’s daughter was 3.

15 years earlier, Alla told me, all of that would have been a lot easier. When you were disabled, in the Soviet period, you would get a pension, and the other forms of care you required. They might even give you a car, she said, and it would not be the best car, but it would be free. The same was true of a caretaker, they would not be the best, but it would be free. In the 1990s, nothing was free. If you needed a

---

214 Alla. Interview by author. (2014, July 21). St. Petersburg, Russia
caretaker, you had to hire one, and Alla could not afford that. The biggest difference about being disabled in the 1990s, rather than the 1980s or 2000s, was that if she had been disabled at any other point, she would not have had to rely on a “strong man” to support her.

Alla did not want to talk about this man. From context, and from the tone of her tone of voice, I assumed that she was talking about her daughter’s father, or at least a man who was in her life in the 1990s, but who is certainly not now. In that 1990s, Alla needed support financially, with an inadequate pension, a reduced salary, a young daughter, as well as the costs that come with disability. She also needed help with more basic things. Alla lived, luckily, on the first floor of her apartment building, which made her living conditions relatively accessible, but she still needed help getting over the door frame of the apartment. St. Petersburg, where Alla lives, was a largely inaccessibly city in 2014, and in the 1990s it was much worse.. In 2014, Alla had a hired aide rather than a ‘strong man’ to help her with these things. In the 1990s, she was dependent on this man, whom she wished was not in her life, and did not have access to other forms of social support that would have allowed her to leave him.

Alla could work in the 1990s. She could support herself, at least somewhat. In the Soviet period, she would not have had to work. In the 1990s, disabled people gained the ‘right to work,’ which Alla described in terms of the loss of the right to not work.215 Even with this work, she remained dependent on the intact family and the support of this man in order to raise her daughter.

Abled women in the 1990s focused on their ability to maintain the family as a stable unit in the general absence of men, who were considered to have disappeared from the family. As a disabled mother of a young daughter, as a wheelchair user in a largely inaccessible city, Alla needed help, and the only form of help available to her was from a man and from the state. As such, Alla was no able to define herself as a participant in a community of mothers. The image of 1990s female participation required single-handedly maintaining a family, and as such of Alla, who could not, the family was isolating, and was a source of trauma.

The family as a form of participation was exclusively the space of mothers. Children, in the family, were preserved and protected, but they did not participate. For disabled children, who had no access to other forms of community, this could be particularly isolating. In 1993, Yulia was 10. Around the same time that Nataliya was recovering from her illness, Yulia fell during gymnastics practice and broke her back. Yulia’s family lived on the fourth floor of their apartment. Yulia’s wheelchair could not go down all those stairs, and the only way to go outside was for someone to carry her, which was not often possible. Even if she had been able to leave her apartment, there were not many places for her to go, or any way for her to get there. Accessible buses and taxes did not exist in the 1990s for wheelchair users, and the few support systems for disabled people in the Soviet Union, such as state-provided caretakers and the free-if-rare wheelchair car, had disappeared. Almost nowhere that she might have wanted to go, including her old elementary school, had an accessible entrance.

---

216 Yulia. Interview by author. (2014, June 30) Moscow, Russia
So, for the next 8 years, Yulia was stuck in her family’s apartment. If she had been able to go outside and travel, Yulia would have still had to transfer from her old school to the special accessible school, which was much too far away. Instead, her parents hired tutors, who came to her in the apartment. Her education at home was much better than she likely would have received in an underfunded and overcrowded school for disabled children. But there were drawbacks. Yulia could not go on school trips, or participate in school activities. She did not even have any opportunities to meet other children her own age, “It was very boring,” she said.

Yulia’s life changed when she was accepted into a study abroad program in the United States, when she was 18. Until then, she had not realized she deserved to have friends, to go on trips and, in general, to not be bored. In the U.S., she went to an inclusive high school, the first time she had been to school since she was 10. Her host mother was another wheelchair user, and even taught her to drive a car, which became an important symbol of independence for Yulia when she returned home to Moscow. When she returned, she decided that she wanted to make sure other disabled children had the same opportunities she had found in the U.S., to participate and to meet other disabled people, instead of being trapped in their home like she had been. For Yulia, her space in the home was insufficient without access and integration outside of the home. When the family was the only space for disabled children, the disabled child was trapped there.

Yulia’s family was entirely intact. With stable, unchaotic family as the primary available form social participation, Yulia’s constant presence in the domestic sphere should have been ideal. As she describes it, however, Yulia’s childhood was
isolating through a lack of participation and a lack of access to a community outside of the home. As a disabled child who was part of an intact family, the idea that she was allowed to participate, or allowed to want to participate in a broader community was surprising to her. Her experience of the 1990s as traumatic and as isolating resulted from the stability of her household. *Because* her family was fully intact, and *because* she was fully present in the home, Yulia was isolated from other forms of participation and unaware that participation and community were an option for her.

The stable family was similarly isolating for abled children as well. Adults in the 1990s remembered the stability of the Soviet era childhood positively, and focused on the idea of that stability as an important and disappearing ideal.\(^{217}\) For young people of the 1990s, however, the idea of a stable Soviet childhood was less valuable. Young people tended to describe their Soviet era childhood as ‘normal’ and largely positive, but were not so interested in maintaining the idea of stability.\(^{218}\)

Yulia was an isolated child in an isolated family, and so her situation was especially extreme, but nevertheless her experience of a stable childhood is illustrative for understanding the experience of childhood in the 1990s more generally. The family unit did not provide an available form of participation for Yulia. It was isolating, because as a child protected from the destabilizing forces of the general 1990s community, Yulia existed wholly in a space of maternal preservation, with no access to forms of alternate participation or that destabilized


community. As such stability prevented her from accessing a community, and was therefore traumatic.

Conclusion

Trauma, in the 1990s, occurred because of the sudden experience of isolation that happened because of the collapse of Soviet society. Motherhood was a means of preventing that trauma, by keeping a piece of society together. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the place of disabled children had been in state institutions and hospitals, and the upbringing children as meaningful work had been limited to those who could be raised into workers. In the 1990s, though, raising a Soviet citizen had ceased to be the purpose of childhood and so disabled children had a potential place in the family.

While certain mothers of disabled children began to see raising a disabled child as morally urgent work, abled mothers of abled children did not always see it in the same way. The work of keeping the family together was difficult for all women in the 1990s. Abled mothers of abled children who had no reason to see families of disabled children as similar to their own tended to regard mothers of disabled children as a burden, as selfish, and as destructive to their own work of motherhood.

Both disabled mothers and the mothers of disabled children had no access to a broader community of support and knowledge from other women. Because they relied on state support, and therefore could not preserve the family as a stable institution on their own, the motherhood of these women was not considered, by
abled mothers of abled children to be a source of stability. Without a broader community of mothers, the families of these women became a space of isolation, in which no other form of community was available. For mothers of disabled children, however, other women, mothers of abled children who had reason to see the motherhood of a disabled child as similar to their own experience of motherhood created an alternate form of extended family and community to support those mothers. Disabled mothers did not have this same access to community, and as such remained isolated

The intact family form of participation was available to adult women, but was therefore fundamentally isolating to children. The work of motherhood in the 1990s required the total preservation of the safety of the child, through providing absolute stability. Because general 1990s society was unstable, that required isolation in a family unit from a broader form of community. As such, both the intact and the disrupted family were isolating to children.
Lost Children, Grieving Mothers, and Unpopular Wars

The Black Tulip War Memorial in Yekaterinburg was erected in 1996. Its name comes from the nickname for the planes that carried dead soldiers back from Afghanistan. In the center of the memorial is a statue of a single soldier. He sits with his head bowed, an expression of defeat, hopelessness and despair on his face. In one hand, he is still holding his rifle, pointed uselessly into the air. Flanking him on all sides are a series of curved pillars, into which are etched the names of local soldiers killed during both the Soviet-Afghan war and the First Chechen War.

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, memorialization of the Soviet War in Afghanistan had been largely neglected. In the early 1990s, local memorials began cropping up across Russia. These memorials were built not by the state, but by organizations of Afghan Veterans and Soldier’s mothers. Often, they present a decontextualized image of brotherhood between soldiers, removing the controversial political context of the war and the fact of violence. The Yekaterinburg Black Tulip

219 Natalia Danilova, "Kollektivnye Deistviia Uchastnikov Voiny V Afganistane V Kontekste Sotsial’noi Politiki" (Saratovskii gosudarstvenyi tekhnicheskii univerditet).
221 Danilova, "Kollektivnye Deistviia Uchastnikov Voiny V Afganistane V Kontekste Sotsial’noi Politiki."
memorial is one of the largest of these memorials, built through funding by Yekaterinburg’s largest veterans organization.\textsuperscript{222} Yekaterinburg, in the 1990s, as the center of the Afghan veterans mafia.\textsuperscript{223}

Sometimes, the Black Tulip memorial is read as an anti-war memorial, largely because it was built by those who were sent to fight rather than by those who sent them, and because of its focus on the defeated soldier, on the human cost of the war. This is not, however, the message of the memorial. Instead, the memorial presents an image of the betrayed soldier prevented from fighting. This soldier is still holding his weapon. No one has defeated him, but he nevertheless sits in defeat. His despair indicates his betrayal, that the heroic image he has to offer has been unacknowledged, wasted on a pointless war. The Yekaterinburg Black Tulip memorial, therefore, is a memorial to those who have not been memorialized.

The Soviet War in Afghanistan is sometimes called the Soviet Vietnam. The two wars are similar. Both involved an invasion by a super power looking to prop up a friendly, but widely hated government. Both involved a military superpower fighting a guerilla army, in which the military power lost after a drawn out campaign. Both were a lesson in imperial overstretch.

The Soviet-Afghan war began in 1979, when Soviet troops invaded to shore up the pro-Soviet Afghan regime. Soviet troops quickly took over major cities and towns, but the rest of the country remained controlled by several different opposition groups who, over the course of the war, coalesced into a single organization typically

\textsuperscript{222} Oushakine, \textit{The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War and Loss in Russia}. pp 130-202.
known as the Mujahideen. The Mujahideen had extensive international backing, especially from the United States, for which the disorganized Soviet army had not been prepared. The war was therefore drawn out and extremely bloody. Soviet troops were brutal. Often, they leveled entire towns in order to destroy hiding places for the Mujahideen. The war produced a million Afghan casualties, many of which were civilians, and created the largest refugee population in the world. Official statistics were the Soviet army, were not published until 1988. They listed 15,000 Soviet soldiers dead and another 35,000 wounded. To many people, that seem too low.224

Another similarity, between the Soviet-Afghan War and the American war in Vietnam is that as both wars dragged one, they became incredibly unpopular at home. At first, information about the war in Afghanistan was hidden from the Soviet public. Because the war was not, officially, declared a war until 1983, returning veterans were referred to as ‘ex-service personnel,’ and were not entitled to veteran’s benefits.225 Soviet soldiers were told that they had been invited by the Afghan government to help the fraternal Afghan people live in peace.226 They were told that they were fulfilling their internationalist duty. As the war dragged on, public opinion

---

226 Vladislav Tamarov, Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier's Story(Ten Speed Press, 2001). pp 11-18
turned increasingly negative. Soldiers came home sick, wounded, and often addicted to heroin. Dead soldiers were flown back in sealed, zinc coffins which their families were not allowed to open. By 1985, most people were wondering if there was a point to the war after all.

In 1985, after a succession of rapidly dying Soviet leaders, Gorbachev came to power. In 1986, the policy of glasnost began, and Soviet citizens were able to criticize the war openly. As more information became available, more and more people came to see the war as an enormous political mistake, a waste of lives and resources. The war, then, became a central avenue of critique of Soviet foreign policy and even of the purpose of the Soviet project as a whole.

The process of withdrawing Soviet troops from Afghanistan began in mid-1988. In February 1989, Boris Gromov, the commander of Soviet forces in Afghanistan, crossed over the Friendship Bridge between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, symbolically becoming was the last Soviet soldier to leave the country. The Soviet Union never fully recovered from either the social or economic upheaval caused by the war. Two years after the war end, the Soviet Union itself collapsed. In Afghanistan, the fighting never really stopped either. The instability in the country caused by the Soviet invasion led, eventually, to the rise of the Taliban.

Soviet veterans of the war in Afghanistan were called Afgantsy (singular: Afganets), meaning the Afghans. Afgantsy also call the Soviet-Afghan War the Soviet Vietnam, but for different reasons. Rather than focusing on the common

---

228 Harmon, "Afgan: The Soviet Experience."
229 Tamarov, Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier's Story.
pointlessness of both wars, they instead find common ground with American veterans of the Vietnam War through the experience of trauma. Afgantsy and Vietnam veterans groups met several times to talk about PTSD, in both New York and in the Soviet Union, just after the end of the war. Afgantsy often received treatment for their trauma only through Vietnam veteran’s organizations. In interviews and memoirs, Afgantsy point out that, by 1989, the number of Vietnam veterans who had died of unnatural causes had surpassed combat deaths. This, they suggested, would be their inevitable fate as well.

Trauma, as a diagnosis, had disappeared from Soviet psychology in the late 1920s. Soviet reports on the American War in Vietnam brought it back into Soviet thinking, in the Western form of ‘PTSD.’ PTSD seemed like an American phenomenon, something the Soviet Union had a superior cultural framework to deal with. A few years later, however, in the Afghan war, Soviet soldiers began coming home with many of the same symptoms as Vietnam veterans. Afgantsy, through their contacts with Vietnam veterans, brought back broader awareness of PTSD to the Soviet Union as a medical and psychological phenomenon. The idea of PTSD in Russia was not quite the same as it was in the U.S, however. PTSD in Russia is typically defined through the relationship of an individual to society rather than inclusively in terms of the experience of an individual. In collectivist society more

---

231 Tamarov, Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier's Story. pp 156-172.
generally, symptoms of PTSD are also sometimes exhibited differently. For example, flattening of affect is more common among people with PTSD in Russia than in the US.\textsuperscript{236}

Trauma, in Russia, is a political experience. In the Soviet Union, and in Russia, disabled veterans were a privileged group relative to other disabled people. Benefits and support were and are distributed based on an unofficial hierarchy, with disabled veterans at the top and disabled children at the bottom.\textsuperscript{237} Among veterans, there is also a hierarchy of support. Veterans of the ‘Great Patriotic War,’ a central war of Soviet national identity, receive by far the most support. Veterans of widely unpopular wars, meaning Afghanistan and Chechnya, receive much less.\textsuperscript{238} As described in the first chapter, the incorporation or non-incorporation of traumatizing experience into collective identity changes whether that trauma is experienced as disabling or not. Those who are disabled in politically acceptable ways have potentially access to moving out of the category of disabled through shared trauma, as with certain veterans of World War II. Veterans of Afghanistan and Chechnya were traumatized and disabled in embarrassing and unpopular wars, and therefore there was no ‘good’ way for them to be disabled.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the narrative of the war as pointless became a narrative of the isolation of Afghan veterans. In response, veterans of the Afghan war formed tightly knit, highly political, and at times extremely violent communities.

\textsuperscript{236} See: Richards, "Analyzing the 'Chechen Syndrome': Disadaptation of Veterans with War Trauma in Contemporary Russian Literature."
\textsuperscript{237} Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!': A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History."
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
Through these groups, they could redefine their trauma as a source of collective identity, in which, through victimization, they had been isolated both from adult male officers and from other young people and come to form alternate, superior communities. In the 1990s, they also began to incorporate veterans of the Chechen war as fellow lost young people. Through relationships of brotherhood between soldiers, Afghan and Chechen veterans demanded societal recognition of their sacrifice as a valid form of participation, and, through the mafia, created an alternate, isolated, traumatized community of young men that withstood the broader experience of isolation in the 1990s.

Grieving Mothers

From the beginning of the Afghan war in 1979 to its end in 1989, an entirely different generation of soldiers was leaving the country as had initially invaded. Soviet compulsory military service lasted 3 or 4 years, which means that soldiers who left for Afghanistan in 1985 returned in 1988 or 1989, by which time Soviet society was dramatically different.

In an earlier period, participation in the military was prestigious, and a necessary component of adult masculinity. By the end of the Soviet period, however, this was no longer true. Soldiers were not considered adult men. Instead, they were young men, an age category that lasted through a person’s 20s. A young man was still a child.
Especially towards the end of the war, many young men often tried to get out of serving. Wealthy and well-connected parents would bribe anyone they could to get their child out of the army, or at least out of Afghanistan. Young men without those connections would instead to bribe doctors and officials, go to university or even break their own legs to avoid service, which did not always work.  

During glasnost, a slew of documentaries were released which had wide audiences, addressing social problems that the state had previously concealed. One of the first of these was the 1986 Latvian documentary *Is It Easy To Be Young?* which presented interviews with a variety of young people in Latvia, discussing the problems in their lives. It addressed a number of topics that had previously been taboo, including drug abuse, rock music and the war in Afghanistan. The documentary’s frank portrayal of social problems signaled that it was now possible to talk about such topics.

The film starts with young people at a rock concert, showing a moment of freedom, before presenting the problems and difficulties faced by Latvian young people of the 1980s. The answer to the question posed by the film’s title is a definitive ‘no.’ In particular, the film often focused on how the Soviet regime itself had made the lives of young people especially difficult. Interviews with returning soldiers from Afghanistan come towards the end of the film, and represent an

---

241 See: Maruta Vitolis, "From the Personal to the Public: Juris Podnieks and Latvian Documentary Cinema" (Ohio State University, 2008).
especially poignant critique of the Soviet system.\textsuperscript{242} The veterans spoke about the difficulty of returning from the war, about feeling out of place in society, about being unable to return to civilian life.

The problems, in the film, are often presented as placed specifically on Latvian youth by the Soviet state. One veteran says, “If you look at my generation and how we fought, just because we had to—think of how we’d fight if it was for our homeland.”\textsuperscript{243} Latvian Afgantsy were portrayed as young people who have been betrayed pointlessly by the alien Soviet state.\textsuperscript{244} Their isolation was caused by having to fight for meaningless Soviet causes, while fighting for an independent Latvia would allow them to be heroic, to participate meaningfully.

Two other documentaries that also addressed the difficulties faced by returning veterans from Afghanistan are \textit{Homecoming} from 1987 and \textit{Pain} from 1988. \textit{Homecoming} is a short, 17-minute film shot in black and white.\textsuperscript{245} It begins with a series of shots of Afghanistan, with eerie music and a man’s voice whispering, “Hear me, Motherland.” From there, the film moves into a series of emotional interviews with traumatized and wounded soldiers returning from the war. The climatic scene is an interview with a grieving mother. She sits in her son’s bedroom, holding her son’s letters, trying to cope with the idea that his death was pointless.

\textsuperscript{243} Ibid. pp 127-157
\textsuperscript{244} Vitols, "From the Personal to the Publis: Juris Podnieks and Latvian Documentary Cinema."
\textsuperscript{245} Tatyana Chubakova, "Homecoming." (1987).
Homecoming is a jarring and upsetting film. It appeals for anger and sympathy on behalf of victimized soldiers and lost youth.²⁴⁶

Recall that that a central image of disability in Russia is a person with terminal cancer, because death at a young age represents a loss of future potential labor capacity. For that reason, the image of a mother grieving her dead son is an image of disability. The death of the soldier indicates the total loss of work/capacity of a lifetime. Through the death of her child, the grieving mother’s work of raising a child has also been made meaningless, in that her son has been made into a disabled child, unable to become a Soviet citizen capable of work. The focus on the pointlessness of the war indicates that her son’s death was not its own form of participation, that her labor and his loss of labor were pointless, because they were wasted on a cause that was not a meaningful forms of contribution.

In *Is It Easy to Be Young*, one soldier says, referring to his friend that lost a leg in the war, “He will never be whole. He’s young, he dreamt of dancing.” Later, that same soldier says, “It’s scary to be excluded from life at 20.” The fact of being isolated at such a young age, and as such that total loss of work capacity of an adult lifetime, is particularly difficult for this soldier. This image of disability is an image of betrayal by the state. The call at the beginning of *Homecoming* is a call of anger from other mothers for women whose access to meaningfulness through motherhood has been taken from them by the Soviet state.²⁴⁷

"Pain is a feature-length Belorussian documentary,"\(^{248}\) which also presents veterans as betrayed, lost children. It is also based in interviews, particularly interviews with disabled veterans, the mothers and widows of dead soldiers, and a village priest. The film focuses on grief, particularly mother’s grief, and the suffering caused by loss. Unlike *Homecoming*, *Pain* provides a narrative of moving on from loss. The film begins and ends with a Russian Orthodox Church service. Both *Homecoming* and *Pain* begin and end with music, but the religious chants in *Pain* are not discordant. At the end of the film, the religious service is revealed to be a baptism, presenting a hopeful image of future childhood. By focusing on a religious image of the future, *Pain* seems to indicate that the solution to the problem of the grief and loss of a child or childhood caused by the Soviet system is necessarily not a Soviet solution.\(^{249}\)

The reputation of the military suffered after the war. In 1989, the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers formed, to address problems in the military. Many of them were the mothers of soldiers killed outside of combat. Through protests they made information about the military practice of dedovschina, meaning ‘rule of grandfathers,’ public.\(^{250}\) Dedovshchina was (and is) an extensive system of hazing in the army, involving the abuse and sometimes rape of first and second year conscripts by third and fourth years, at times resulting in serious injury and even death.\(^{251}\)


\(^{251}\) Ibid.
The military failed to sufficiently respond to the protests of the Committee of Soldier’s Mothers, and the image of the maternal grief was powerful. Along with reports about extensive military corruption and crime, including stories of sealed zinc coffins being transported back containing drugs rather than corpses, the army came to be hated. The army, for these mothers and through this imagery of maternal grief, represented the destruction of the intact family and of the Soviet promise of a stable, easy, happy childhood.

Maternal grief, as an image, was a fundamental means of social and political critique. The dead soldier, the wounded soldier, the traumatized soldier and the grieving mother all represented disrupted families and lost childhood. Those images were used, in documentaries and by mother’s groups, as an accusation, that the state had not only failed in its role as a provider of the conditions of happy childhood, but had actively, senselessly, taken children away. Both the dead soldier and the traumatized soldier represented this lost child through their inability to grow into Soviet workers. The traumatized veteran, as a lost child, was therefore incapable of, or prevented from, reaching a form of adulthood.

Old Young Men

In Homecoming, one veteran says, in a particularly shocking moment, “I was told to kill and I killed. It was exciting. Like hunting a hare.” His tone of voice is

---

252 Ball, "The Social Crisis of the Russian Military."
casual, unconcerned. His casual violence serves wa an image of lost childhood innocence, and of moral victimization in war. Afgantsy, in their memoirs and interviews, also represent themselves as at times casually violent. Their violence is a central image of their trauma. Often, they focus on it as a reason for their isolation, for their inability to find work. In Zinky Boys, a collection of interviews with Afgantsy, one soldier says, “In war we had to do the exact opposite of what we’d been taught in normal life, and now we’re meant to unlearn all the skills we learnt in war. I’m an excellent shot and grenades always hit their target. Who needs all that now?” Their inability to find work through their violence indicated their trauma and isolation.

Veterans also focus on their youth. In his memoir The Soviet Vietnam, Vladislav Tamarov describes himself and other Afgantsy as “old young men.” Tamarov’s book devotes a section primarily to images of soldiers in Afghanistan. They are all especially young-looking, and next to their images, Tamarov notes their ages, always “only 19,” before he explains how they died. This relationship with age is a common symptom of trauma also seen among Vietnam veterans. Both groups described feeling both chronologically too young to have experienced what they had experienced, and psychologically too old to be so young. For that reason, their ages became unbearably, both far too old and far too young.

Veterans felt isolated from other young people who had not gone through what they had, whose ages were unambiguous. “The young people ignore us […] We

---

254 Alexievich, Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War. pp 129.
255 Tamarov, Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier's Story. pp 130-156.
hate the younger generation. They spent their time listening to music, dancing with girls and reading books, while we were eating uncooked rice and getting blown up by mines. If you were not there, if you have not seen and lived through what I’ve seen and lived through, then you do not mean a thing to me.”

At the same time, they had nothing in common with adult men, who seemed too young to them as well. Tamarov says, in a section titled “Generals,” “Many of them came to Afghanistan, played at toy soldiers, received metals and left. When I was little, I liked to play with toy soldiers too; only my soldiers were toys, It’s a pity that these generals forget that their toys are flesh-and-blood people.” Tamarov calls them “old children,” meaning the exact opposite of what he means in calling himself a “young old man.” Generals were too psychologically young for their chronological age. Tamarov is not one of those Afgantsy that hates other young people, but hating generals was nearly universal. Afgantsy all felt betrayed by the war, by the generals that sent them.

A central source of the Afgantsy’s trauma was both the narrative and the fact of the pointlessness of the Afghan war. The documentary Homecoming ends with a veteran asking, “What are we supposed to do with our memories of the war?” This question of the place of a soldier’s memory, now incompatible with the general narrative and cultural memory of the war as a pointless, was a common theme. Veterans, in the early 1990s tried to explain themselves, tried to be understood. Tamarov’s memoir serves as an explanation of his own memory, of why he fought

---

257 Alexievich, Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War. pp19.
258 Tamarov, Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier’s Story. pp 104.
and what that meant at the time, an attempt at bridging the gap between soldiers and civilians. \(^{260}\)

Physical injuries tend to function in the accounts of veterans as a representation of their inability to integrate, and thus of their trauma. They were also used as a means of rejecting the narrative that their war was pointless. Veterans describe how they cannot get prosthetics in the Soviet Union, that they cannot work because they were disabled. The two, physical injury and psychological isolation, are presented in the same terms. In *Zinky Boys*, one soldier uses language of betrayal, often used to describe psychological trauma in Afgantsy narrative, to discuss physical injury “I do not want to hear it was a political mistake, OK? Give me back my legs if it was really a mistake.” \(^{261}\) Injury serves as a representation of their degree of sacrifice in the war. As such, both physical and psychological trauma indicated their betrayal their degree of unrecognized sacrifice. Both prevented the Afganets from integrating into society. Physical injury was also a physical reminder of isolating memory. In *Zinky Boys*, “The hardest thing of all is to forget that I once had two legs.” \(^{262}\)

The idea that the war was meaningless, and the fact of its meaninglessness, had material consequences for Afgantsy. In *Zinky Boys*, one soldier says, “We were sent to Afghanistan to obey orders. In the army you obey orders first and then, if you like, discuss their merits-when it’s all over. ‘Go!’ means exactly that. If you refuse you get thrown out of the party. You took the military oath, didn’t you? And back home,

---


\(^{262}\) Ibid. p 59.
when you ask the local party committee for something you need, they tell you, ‘It was not us that sent you!’ Well, who did send us?”

By attributing the war to a mistake of the past, the state avoided providing care for veterans. The war, in not becoming part of a national narrative, was someone else’s fault and as such its veterans were someone else’s responsibility. Afgantsy had expected to be provided apartments and financial support, like veterans of the Great Patriotic War, but instead they received next to nothing. The war, in being pointless, was not a valid form of participation, and so its veterans were not so deserving of state support.

In response to their isolation, Afgantsy often formed veterans groups. These groups were sometimes political, and were sometimes social, but they were largely a mix of both. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were a lot of these groups, in different cities, representing different branches of the armed forces. Often they were named after specific units and places where soldiers had served. These groups were a means by which Afgantsy created communities in which their trauma was collective. As one veteran said, “Shall I tell you why we go on meeting, we veterans? To save ourselves by staying together.” As a group, veterans could redefine their trauma, say that they had participated, and demand that they be incorporated back into the broader community. Sometimes, this involved calling for more social and economic support. Other times it involved memorialization, demanding their dead be called heroes.

---

263 Ibid. p 95.
265 Alexievich, Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War. p 94.
Afgantsy were widely hated.\textsuperscript{266} Veterans said this was because people took out their negative attitudes towards the war on its veterans. Often it was the result of a sense that, in being participants in a pointless war, Afgantsy were pointlessly, senselessly violent. As one soldier explained it, “The sooner we shut up about all this the better it’ll be for everyone. The only people who need this ‘truth’ are the know-nothings who want to use it as an excuse to spit in our faces. ‘You bastards! You killed and robbed and now you expect special privileges?’ We’re expected to take all the blame, and to accept that everything we went through was for nothing.”\textsuperscript{267}

Afgantsy felt that the civilian assumption that they were violent came from the fact that they had been made violent. The army taught them violence, demanded violence, and left them with no skills but violence. When it was convenient, the state continued to want to use their violence. As one soldier said, “Now if the police need to frighten the local mafia the come to us Afgantsy. ‘Come on boys!’ they say, ‘give us a hand!’ Or if they want to harass or break up some unofficial political group, ‘Call the Afgantsy in!’ they say. An Afganets, in other words, is a killing machine, with big fists, a weak head and no conscience. No wonder we’re feared and hated by everyone.”\textsuperscript{268}

There was some truth to the stereotype that Afgantsy groups were often violent. Soldiers came back from the war angry and betrayed. They wanted to fight their isolation, and that often meant physically. As one soldier said, “Just let someone even hint they do not like my field uniform! For some reason I’m looking for that

\textsuperscript{266} Oushakine, \textit{The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War and Loss in Russia}. pp 130-202.
\textsuperscript{267} Alexievich, \textit{Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War}. p 113.
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid. p 94.
someone- I’m spoiling for a fight.”269 This soldier wanted to quite literally attack the notion that the war was pointless or that he should not be proud of having fought in Afghanistan.

At other times, violence was a means by which veterans asserted their continued presence. The violence was a source of their isolation, and therefore a means by which they identified themselves collectively. Young veterans, in veterans groups, got together and talked about who they blamed and who they would like to hurt.270 As one soldier says,

“I got home and tried to be good but sometimes I have a desire to cut the odd throat. I came home blind. A bullet went in one temple, came out the other and destroyed both retinas. I can only distinguish light and dark but that does not stop me recognizing the people whose throats I’d like to cut: the ones who won’t give us flats (‘It was not us who sent you to Afghanistan’), the ones who try and wash their hands of us. What happened to me is still boiling inside. Do I want to have my past taken away from me? No! It’s what I live by.”271

Afgantsy often blamed late Soviet culture and the changes in the Soviet Union for their isolation, because with those changes the meaning of the war also changed. They fought, again physically, unfamiliar forms of youth culture. In Zinky Boys, one veteran talks about how he does not want to join Afgantsy groups because of their violence, that soldiers in those groups would say, “We do not like the heavy metal fans, do we lads? OK, let’s go smash their teeth in!”272 Tamarov describes how Afgantsy protested against youth culture that was unfamiliar, “Down with punks,

269 Ibid. p 61.
270 Ibid. p. 121
271 Ibid. p 172.
272 Ibid. p. 121
rockers, break-dancers!" Changing styles and culture represented their isolation from other young people. One soldier said, “I’m scared to go home,’ people say. Why? Simple! We’ll get home and everything will have changed in those two years, different fashions, music, different streets even. And a different view of the war. We’ll stick out like a sore thumb.”

Afgantsy groups were extremely nationalist, to the point of sometimes being considered or even simply being fascist. They objected to societal changes and formed groups to address and correct the isolation that caused their trauma. Their main goal and purpose was to reassess the narrative that they had ‘betrayed their country,’ that they were not heroes, and to work to demand recognition. Through Afgantsy groups, they tried to make their trauma collective, a means of defining identity. Even more than they hated the young people who called their war useless, though, they hated government officials who sent them to a useless war.

In Zinky Boys, one veterans tells this story: “I had a talk with an old lecturer at college. ‘You were a victim of a political mistake,’ he said. ‘You were forced to become accomplices to a crime.’

‘I was eighteen then,’ I told him. ‘How old were you? You kept quiet when we were being roasted alive. […] You kept quiet over here while we were doing the killing over there. Now all of a sudden you go on about victims and mistakes….’

---

273 Tamarov, Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier’s Story. p 11.
274 Alexievich, Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War.
Anyhow, I do not want to be a victim of a political mistake. And I’ll fight for the right not to be! Whatever anyone says, those boys were heroes!”

While other young people led unfamiliar lives that Afgantsy could not be a part of, the betrayal of the older generation was more fundamental. It was the older generation that had sent them to the war, who had failed to save them. Despite their conservatism and their general objection to 1980s Western youth culture, Afgantsy were central in defending the White House from hard-line communists in the August 1991 attempted coup. The explanation they gave to journalists was that it was Soviet imperialism that had forced them into war, and they wanted to prevent its return. Otherwise, it was that they had been asked by officers to attack their own people, which seemed like another exploitative use of their violence. In the memory of the attempted coup, the social participation of Afgantsy is often emphasized, as a rare moment of participation in the broader community for them. After the coup, they went back to being isolated.

Afgantsy, in their writing, never really talk about their relationships with their fathers. There was, however, a focus on their relationships with mothers, and on their mother’s grief. Often, Afgantsy describe lying to their mothers in their letters, pretending that the war was easier than it actually was, or that they were not in Afghanistan, or at least that they were not in danger. The people the Afgantsy hated most are those adult men who failed to save them, the older generation. Afgantsy were denied, through their trauma, through their inability to access work, through the

---

276 Alexievich, Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War. p 78.
lack of state support, from participation through adult masculinity. For this they blamed adult men. 

Afgantsy were atemporal. Their trauma meant that like a soldier who had died before becoming an adult, they had no access to work or participation. As ‘old young men’ they had lived another life in Afghanistan, from which they could not return, which meant they could not incorporate into Soviet or Russian life as adults, but they had ceased to be children. They could not become men, but their violence and their isolation from youth culture meant that they were not young anymore either. They were improper youths and improper men, and thus had no available form of participation.

Forgotten Wars

The Afghan War became a forgotten war quickly. 278 *Homecoming, Pain, Is It Easy to Be Young* and *Zinky Boys* all came out between 1987 and 1990, when the war was still on everyone’s mind. *Soviet Vietnam* was written in 1992, and Tamarov writes that he wanted to remind people that the war happened. 279

The Afghan War never really appeared in fiction films, even in the 1980s. In 1991, there were two fiction films that focused on Afghanistan. *Afghan Breakdown* was a four-part TV serial and joint Italian/Soviet production, set near the end of the war and focusing on the process of leaving the country. 280 The film is bleak, the war... 

---

was pointless.\textsuperscript{281} The Afghan was a crime thriller, about a returning soldier who joins a gang.\textsuperscript{282}

At times, Afgantsy appeared as background characters. Fiction films of glasnost focused on sensational topics and social problems, often related to the isolation, dissatisfaction of young people, as in \textit{the Needle}.\textsuperscript{283} The movie \textit{The Messenger Boy},\textsuperscript{284} from 1987, is a fairly light comedy that addressed the real-life problems of young people. At the end of the movie, however, a veteran of Afghanistan appears, suggesting the potential future fate of the teenage main character. Thus, the image of the Afghan veteran represents a potential destruction of childhood before a child is old enough to go to war.\textsuperscript{285}

\textit{Peshawar Waltz} was a film about the Afghan war that appeared in the early post-Soviet period. An action/war movie in the style of an American B-movie, it was shown at the Moscow film festival in 1994.\textsuperscript{286} Despite receiving a good deal of positive critical buzz, it never found a distributor in Russia, and was not released until 2002, when it was picked up by an American company and re-released as ‘Escape from Afghanistan,’ in the context of the American war there.\textsuperscript{287} In Russia, in 1994, there was no market for the film. Afgantsy were the ones who kept talking about the

\textsuperscript{281} Birgit Beumers, A History of Russian Cinema pp 214-221.
\textsuperscript{282} Vladimir Mazur, "The Afghan,"(1990).
\textsuperscript{284} Karen Shakhnazarov, "The Messenger Boy,"(1987).
\textsuperscript{287} Timur Bekmambetov, "Peshavar Waltz,"(1994).
war. Like Tamarov, they wrote memoirs. They built memorials, and called for support. Otherwise, no one wanted to think about it.

_Peshawar Waltz_ is about a French doctor and a British journalist who go to a military base on the border of Pakistan, and get caught up in an uprising by the Soviet prisoners of war who take over the base. The film is dark and violent. Both prisoners and guards ultimately seem inhuman. Some of the prisoners finally escape, but Soviet helicopters arrive and kill the survivors, in order to hide the involvement of Pakistan in the war. While being killed, one of the soldiers shouts, “They betrayed us, goddamit, they betrayed us.” The only survivor, the British journalist, shoots himself, unable to deal with the pointless violence and tragedy.

According to the film’s director, Timur Bekmambetov, the movie was intended to document “a pivotal moment in the life of our generation.” The movie focuses on the sense of the war’s pointlessness, its violence, the feeling of betrayal that also appeared in earlier, more popular documentaries. In 1994, very few people saw _Peshawar Waltz_. It was not a narrative with popular appeal anymore.

The movie _The Muslim_, released in 1995, was more successful. It sold well and received a few awards. The _Muslim_ is also about a Soviet prisoner of war, but the Afghan war is only in the background. In the film, Kolya is a Russian soldier who

---

289 Despite his unsuccessful first film, Bekmambetov went on to make the incredibly popular _Night Watch_ movies.
returns after being held in Afghanistan for 7 years, where he converted to Islam. The
Russia he returns to is unfamiliar. In Russia, he finds crime, corruption and
immorality. In his absence, his father killed himself, his brother went to jail, and his
girlfriend became a sex worker. Kolya is the only good person left in the village. His
neighbors hate him because of his faith and in the end, he is murdered while he
prays.292 In this film, the isolated Afghan veteran is used as fundamental critique of
post-Socialist society from the outside. The image of the veterans is an isolated one,
but his isolation results in a lack of corruption. The tragedy of the image of the
Afghan veteran was the condition rest of the rest of society.293

Often, Afgantsy were hated, but there was still a great deal of concern for
them, as people betrayed by the state, who were not being cared for. In the 1990s,
Afgantsy were more likely than the rest of the population to be homeless. They
lacked support and jobs, and the apartments they had expected to receive never
materialized. They were also traumatized, unable to find work, unable to find forms
of community. Veterans programs and veterans groups only supported those Afgantsy
who were in those groups. Everyone else was alone.

There was a strong association between Afgantsy and homelessness even in
2014. When I mentioned Afgantsy to people in Russia, they often said that they
would not be hard to find, that homeless Afgantsy were everywhere. While Afgantsy
continue to make up a significant percentage of the homeless population in Russia, in
Moscow and St. Petersburg, at least, homelessness tends to be hidden away.

293 Other than these films, the Afghan War was largely absent in film until Fedor
Balabanov, "Cargo 200," (Kinokompaniya CTB, 2007).
Nevertheless, people who remembered the 1990s most clearly thought of homeless Afgantsy as physically, visibly present at all times. In the 1990s, Afgantsy continued to be an image of isolation, when all people were isolated. The presence of veterans, as they represented lost children also represented the instability of the family. That image was traumatic. People were upset by seeing Afgantsy abandoned, as they represented the absent state and lost, stable family.

Afgantsy who were members of veterans groups, on the other hand, were less likely to be homeless, and they tended to be less isolated than the rest of the population. In the 1990s, most people had stopped being at all interested in politics, due to a feeling of political burn out, disillusionment and powerlessness. Politics seemed pointless.\textsuperscript{294} Afghan veterans groups, however, had purpose. They remained extremely politically active, demanding increased recognition and support. In general, in the 1990s, Afgantsy were the only ones interested in representing the Afghan war, through memoirs, political activism and memorials.\textsuperscript{295} From fiction, the Afghan war disappeared, but the image of the Afghan veteran was still used as an image of isolation and as a kind of societal critique.

The image of the Afgantsy was complicated. At times, they represent a form of moral degradation and violence, and were hated. At other times, they represented an image of isolation, of victimization and abandonment. Through their isolation as well, they were isolated from the moral and social corruption of the 1990s, and could represent a lost form of moral purity. Through the formation of communities, they

\textsuperscript{294} Ashwin, Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. pp 90-105.  
\textsuperscript{295} Kinzer, "Muscovites Glimpse Afghan War's Brutality."
were political engaged, and created purpose for themselves in demanding recognition for their forms of work and of sacrifice.

Chechentsi

From 1989 to 1991, the Soviet Union’s Eastern European satellite states and the former Soviet republics gained independence. The primary difference between Chechnya and Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and so on was that Chechnya had been an autonomous republic inside the RSFSR, a step below a Union republic. Nevertheless, in 1991, Chechnya and a few other Russian autonomous republics declared independence. The 1992 federation treaty granted more autonomy to the former ASSRs. Chechnya refused to sign and adopted its own constitution. After very little effort, attempts to broker a deal fell apart. 296

In 1994, the Russian army invaded. They reached the capital quickly, but fighting there was intense. Eventually, Grozny was reduced to rubble. For the next year after taking the capital, the army tried and failed to remove rebels from the rest of the republic, especially in the mountainous areas to the south. Civilian casualties were high. The war lasted until 1996, when Yeltsin signed a peace treaty ahead of the election, primarily because the massively unpopular war would have hurt his chances. Until the second Chechen War, the status of Chechnya in Russia remained ambiguous. 297

---

296 Marcin Mamon Mariusz Pilis, "Chechnya- the Dirty War," (Channel 4, 2005).
One of the main differences in how people’s opinions towards the war and towards the veterans of the war formed was that during the Chechen War, unlike the Afghan war, news and criticism was broadcast on TV right from the beginning. Journalists had fairly open access to Chechnya, and reported the war critically.\textsuperscript{298} While television had long been a primarily source of news in the Soviet Union, many more people switched in the 1990s from getting most of their news from print sources to getting their news from TV. Reporting on the war was strongly visual, with average people seeing daily images of extreme violence from Chechnya, generally totally uncensored.\textsuperscript{299} As such, attitudes towards the war were almost universally negative.

Another consequence of TV news was that soldiers in the Chechen war did not expect the war to be easy and they did not expect the war to have a point. Afghan veterans had sometimes lied to their mothers in their letters, saying the war was not so bad.\textsuperscript{300} Chechen veterans did not have that option. The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers strongly protested the war, and there were news stories about soldiers’ mothers going to the war zone to get their sons out of the army and out of the war, which was demoralizing to Russian troops.\textsuperscript{301}

Since most people had actually watched soldiers commit horrific atrocities on TV, the reputation of Chechen veterans as unnecessarily and cruelly violent was even

\textsuperscript{299} Oushakine, \textit{The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War and Loss in Russia}. pp 130-202.
\textsuperscript{300} Tamarov, \textit{Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier’s Story}. pp 130-156.
\textsuperscript{301} See: Maya Eichler, \textit{Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription and War in Post-Soviet Russia}(Standford: Standford University press, 2011).
stronger. Chechen veterans felt that their reputation as traumatized and as violent resulted in discrimination that prevented them from finding work.

Fiction about the Chechen war appeared more quickly and more broadly than fiction about the Afghan war. One of the first significant films, *Prisoner of the Caucasus*, came out in 1996, while the first Chechen war was ending, and is based on the Tolstoy’s story of the same name. Two Russian soldiers, one of them younger and innocent and the other hardened and cynical, are captured in Chechnya. They are brought to a Chechen village, where the village elder wants to trade them for his own captured son. The exchange falls through, mostly due to Russian double-dealing. Because of the younger soldier Vanya’s innocence, respect and understanding of the Chechens, he forms a relationship with the Village Elder’s daughter Dina, and she convinces her father to release him. The older veteran, however, is executed for killing someone during an escape attempt. At the end of the movie, the Russian army, thinking both soldiers have been killed, pointlessly destroy the whole village in retaliation.

Chechens, in the film, are presented as pure, noble and backward. It is an orientalist image, but a more positive one than that of the cruel and uncaring Russian army. The older soldier is too corrupted by participation in the army to establish a connection with the Chechens, the Russian army pointlessly destroys the whole village, and uncaring bureaucrats ignore Vanya’s mother as she tries to organize an

---

exchange to get her son back. The army is corrupting of youth, and the war serves as a critique of Russian society.

*Prisoner of the Caucasus* represented anti-war attitudes towards soldiers, and towards the war. Again, there was a strong focus on the image of maternal grief in the form of Vanya’s mother. For Vanya, the army and the war were a possible form of corruption of youth. The army and the older soldier both indicate contexts of moral corruption.\(^{304}\)

On the other end of the political spectrum was the film *Purgatory*,\(^{305}\) an ultranationalist, ultraviolent movie. In so far as the movie has a plot beyond gratuitous violence, it is about Russian forces fighting their way out of a hospital in Grozny against Chechens and their various allies. The Chechen forces fight alongside Afghan, Lithuanian, African and African American mercenaries.

Enraged after the Afghans and Chechens crucify a young, blond Russian soldier, the other Russian soldiers kill everyone else. The Russian soldiers are presented as heroic against the dehumanized opposition. They are also victims of politicians and officers. At one point, the soldiers are told to run over the Russian dead with a tank so that the army can hide the number of causalities. The inclusion of Afghans as an ally of Chechens in the film indicates the incorporation of the war in Chechnya into the imagery and community of Afghan war veterans.

During the Chechen war, some Afghan veterans groups began to include Chechens. Some Afghan veteran’s memorials, including the Black Tulip memorial in Yekaterinburg, added in soldiers killed in Chechnya. Chechen veterans structured


their own descriptions of their experience in war and after war on the model of the Afgantsy.\textsuperscript{306} At times, the relationship between the two groups of veterans was strained. Some ‘Chechentsi’ who disliked being secondary in veterans’ organizations, or who saw the Afgantsy, wildly hated and considered criminal, as a negative example, formed their own separate Chechen veterans groups.\textsuperscript{307} For the most part, however, that relationship was strong, and Chechen veterans often referred to themselves as the young brothers of the Afgantsy.\textsuperscript{308} One means by which Chechen veterans expressed their trauma was through describing the desire to return to the war, and the artificial community of the army that was absent in civilian life. In the context of veterans groups, some veterans of the Chechen war created those forms of artificial combat brotherhood through their relationships with the Afgantsy.

Chechen veterans were less likely to try to reassess the narrative of their war as pointless. In their memoirs, they did not try to present their memories of the war in order to be understood, like Afgantsy did. Their war was understood, people had watched it on TV. Memoirs by Chechen veterans instead tended to focus on their inability to reintegrate into society, their experiences of isolation from their families and from their community.\textsuperscript{309} Though they participated in the same veteran’s communities as Afgantsy, veterans of Chechnya were more likely to feel isolated and more likely to be traumatized.

\textsuperscript{306} Oushakine, \textit{The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War and Loss in Russia}. pp 130-202.
\textsuperscript{307} Ibid. pp 130-202.
\textsuperscript{308} Ibid. pp 130-202.
\textsuperscript{309} Richards, "Analyzing the 'Chechen Syndrome': Disadaptation of Veterans with War Trauma in Contemporary Russian Literature."
The isolating traumatic experience of Chechen veterans occurred in a period of general isolation. From when they left to when they returned, society did not change, styles did not change, the societal understanding of the war did not change. While Chechen veterans were traumatized and isolated because of the war, often even from their families, there was no broader community to demand recognition from or to define themselves against. As such, the Chechen veterans movement was not as strong nor as tightly knit as Afgantsy veterans’ groups were. As an image of isolation and trauma, however, they had even more general use than Afgantsy. Isolation was a common experience of young people of the 1990s, whether they were civilians or soldiers.

One of the most important movies of the 1990s, *Brother*, was about a Chechen veteran. The 1997 film became an instant cult hit: the main character, Danila, is remembered as the definitive 1990s hero, and the film turned its director, Alexei Balabanov, and its star, Sergei Bodrov Jr., into celebrities. Brother is a Russian film in the style of an American gangster action movie, meant to serve as a replacement for American media.

After being demobilized from the Russian Army, Danila returns home to find a lack of opportunity available to him, and so he heads to St. Petersburg to meet up with his successful brother Viktor, who turns out to be a hit man for the local mafia. Danila gets involved as well, and ends up killing a number of people before finally taking down most of the mafia in St. Petersburg. Danila, as an action hero, is quiet

---

312 Lawton, *Imagining Russia 2000*. 
and philosophical. He is largely an outsider, with a sort of moral code based largely in ethnic nationalism that no one else accepts.313

Danila is another veteran, like Kolya in *The Muslim*, used as an image of isolation in order to critique 1990s Russian society from the outside. The central difference is that *Brother* is a nationalist film, and that *Brother* continues to be central to the contemporary memory of the 1990s. Danila was isolated from a society that was itself isolated and isolating. As such, he is uncorrupted by western influence, by the moral and social decay of the 1990s. He fights primarily against a variety of non-Russians who have control of the city.314 Danila’s violent patriotism and rejection of 1990s Russian society were a part of his isolation, but they were also a form of purpose. For many young people, specifically young, this kind of violent patriotism was appealing.315

The Chechen War appeared visually on TV, for soldiers, their mothers, and the rest of society, as a pointless, horrifically violent war. Chechen veterans, like Afgantsy, were lost young people. In the context of the 1990s, this image worked differently, however. Chechen veterans were corrupted youth, but also outsiders uncorrupted through their isolation from the general decay of society. In the context of the 1990s, where no one had a safe and happy childhood except through isolation, the Chechen veteran represented a lost, isolated child seeking a form of meaningful

participation to other lost children. As such, Chechen veterans were not isolated from other young people in the way that Afgantsy were. Instead, they used a representation of the experience of all young people in the 1990s.

Union of Invalids of the Afghan War

In 1993, the Afghan Veterans fund in Moscow split into two rival factions. In 1994, the head of the Union of Invalids of the Afghan War, Mikhail Likhodei, was killed by a bomb that had been planted in the speakerphone of the elevator in his apartment.\textsuperscript{316} In 1995, Likhodei’s rival, Valerii Radchikov, was shot multiple times, but survived.\textsuperscript{317} In 1996, a group of 157 people were gathered at Likhodei’s grave for a memorial service when a bomb went off, killing 13 and injuring 70. Among the dead was Likhodei’s successor as head of the Union of Invalids of the Afghan War. When it was discovered that both the 1994 and 1996 bombing were contract killings, carried out by other Afghan veterans vying for control of the Afghan veterans invalid fund, the already negative reputation of Afgantsy became significantly worse.\textsuperscript{318} The Afganets came to be associated with violent crime.

Lacking funds to provide support or pensions to Afgantsy, but pressured into providing something by politically active veterans’ groups, in the early 1990s, the

\textsuperscript{316} Oushakine, \textit{The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War and Loss in Russia}. pp 130-202.
\textsuperscript{318} Oushakine, \textit{The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War and Loss in Russia}. pp 130-202.
Russian state awarded several Afghan veterans’ groups a variety of tax incentives.\textsuperscript{319} Those major veterans’ organizations were exempted from having to pay import taxes on foodstuffs and certain goods, with the expectation that the money they made bringing in cheap vodka and tobacco would be used to provide care and services for disabled veterans.\textsuperscript{320} Instead, the Afghan veterans’ invalid funds were an easy way to launder money, and they quickly became criminalized.\textsuperscript{321}

The 1990s Russian mafia had a precursor in the Soviet mafia, called the thieves-by-law. Neither the Soviet mafia nor the 1990s mafia were one unified group, so talking about ‘a mafia’ can be misleading. Instead, both can be more accurately described as a subculture of organized crime. The thieves-by-law originated in the Soviet prison system, where they developed a culture with specific rules that extended outside of prison.\textsuperscript{322} The Soviet mafia ran the black market, which, especially towards the end of the Soviet period, was extensive. They were the ones with connections, experience, and money that made them the most equipped for the transition to a market economy. Naturally, therefore, the post-Soviet economy was criminalized.

A lot of the old thieves-by-law stuck around in the 1990s, becoming high-ups in the new mafia.\textsuperscript{323} There were quite a few different gangs and most of them did not come out of the prison systems. Gangs tended to arise among groups of people who


\textsuperscript{320} Oushakine, \textit{The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War and Loss in Russia}. pp 130-202.

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid. pp 130-202.


had some reason to continue to have a sense of community, and thus a reason to work with each other, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite the broader isolation of the 1990s. Sometimes, that meant marginalized ethnic groups, including and especially Chechens, whose entire home country or region had an ambiguous legal status. Sports teams also transformed into gangs, especially among boxers. Afgantsy already had a network of organized social groups who even tended to self-identify through casual violence. Naturally, quite a lot of the mafia was made up of veterans.\textsuperscript{324}

The mafia served the same purpose for veterans as veterans groups had before the end of the Soviet period. The mafia replaced state support for veterans. Very little of the money collected by Afghan veterans invalids funds was used to provide support to veterans who were not in the mafia,\textsuperscript{325} but for those who were, it was a source of wealth. The mafia served as a replacement of state support and recognition for veterans. Through the mafia, veterans groups built memorials, demanded recognition and gained power. The mafia was a means by which veterans demanded recognition of their wars and created a community in which their trauma was shared.

The mafia was also an alternative form of participation, available to veterans. It was, in particular, a place of brotherhood, where Chechen veterans participated as the younger brothers of Afgantsy. Young men who joined the mafia described doing so because their only skill was violence, and because they could not find other work,

\textsuperscript{324} Rose Brady, \textit{Kapitalizm} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).
\textsuperscript{325} Oushakine, \textit{The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War and Loss in Russia}. pp 130-202.
forms of isolation experienced primarily by traumatized veterans. The mafia was a space of community available to these isolated, traumatized young men. It provided them an alternative form of participation, in which community was defined through the bonds between traumatized young men. The idea of brotherhood allowed mafiosos a space in which they did not participate as adults nor as children, but as ‘old young men.’

Conclusion

The memorials built by Afghan veterans’ groups focused on the victimization of veterans. They also focused on an image of brotherhood abstracted from the context of the war. ‘Brother,’ in the 1990s, had a dual meaning, referring to mafiosos, who called each other ‘brother.’ The presence of soldiers, as young men, in the mafia, this focus on imagery of brotherhood as a place of a young man’s participation in the family, defined the mafia as a young man’s community. It was a young man’s form of participation in the absence of access to adult masculinity.

The place of the disabled, traumatized veteran in the family indicates that there were two competing images of familial participation in the 1990s. On one hand, imagery of motherhood focused primarily on the mother’s role in protecting and caring for her child. Veterans’ mothers’ committees functioned as a form of community for mothers of disabled young people, much like organizations like GAOORDI served as a community for mothers of younger disabled children. This

326 Volkov, Violent Entrepreneurs.
image of the family of a disabled soldier positions the soldier as in need of reincorporation into the family as a child, removed from the army and placed back into the isolating space of a mother’s care.

On the other hand, the mafia was an image of a family of lost children, an a fundamentally disrupted family, which also worked to disrupt community more generally. In this image of the family, the lost child lacked support and was isolated from the rest of the community, including from other young people who existed as children in the context of the intact family. Care, social support, access to work and community existed between brothers, in which older brothers provide community and support for younger brothers in the absence of bother mothers and fathers.

Both of these images of the family as a form of participation necessarily existed in the absence of an image adult masculine participation. Women’s participation was dependent on women’s communities, which created and maintained stable, protective families without men, and female participation that relied on men was improper and insufficient. Veterans, through isolation, trauma and the inability to access work, were unable to participate in adult masculinity. Instead, they actively rejected it, because adult men were the origin of their isolation and betrayal. In both of these images of the family, adult men, especially adult men as fathers, are absent.
There was a joke Russians told in the 1990s:

A New Russian is in a car crash. "Oh, my Mercedes! Oh, oh, my poor Mercedes!" he cries. "Your car? So what!" says a passerby, "Take a look at your arm!" The New Russian gazes at where his arm used to be, and moans, "Ohhhh, my Rolex!"  

New Russian jokes were incredibly popular in the 1990s, and incredibly widespread. The New Russian joke existed in a different context from Soviet anekdoti, which arose during a period of censorship, and that had a fundamental effect on their form and content. New Russian jokes were widely and openly accessible, and were not only found in the form of oral folklore. Many of the jokes I will be presenting in this chapter were printed in newspapers in the 1990s. Books of New Russian jokes were sold at stands in metro stations, sometimes with a little picture of a golden toilet to indicate that they were part of a New Russian joke series. People could buy cassettes of full of recorded New Russian jokes.  

---

The origin of the term ‘New Russian’ is not entirely clear. Some people suggest it came to Russian from English, where it may have originated with Hedrick Smith’s *The New Russians*, published in 1990. Otherwise, it may have come more directly from ‘nouveau riche.’ The image of the New Russian as a stock character, however, is quite specific. He is a criminal and he uses criminal slang. He has a cell phone, a new and uncommon luxury item in the 1990s, but he does not know how to use it. He wears a bright red jacket, representing his garish tastes. He drives a Mercedes 600, though sometimes he has a Rolls Royce as well. He has a wife who spends all his money and cheats on him with her bodyguard, though he cheats on her as well as a matter of show. The most common New Russian joke, which is nearly universally known, goes like this: A New Russian meets a second New Russian, and the first compliments the second on his tie. “Thanks,” says the second new Russian, “I got it for $500!” “Ah, you’ve been swindled!” says the first, “I know where you could have gotten it for $800.”

New Russians were in all ways improperly masculine. They did not work, they did not participate, and they contributed to and created the conditions of isolation in the 1990s. Nevertheless, they were the ones who had access to power and wealth. Anekdoti in the Soviet period functioned through the mocking of official rhetoric of state power, and were necessarily unofficial and underground. The widespread availability and commercial success of New Russian jokes points to the complexity of power in the 1990s.

---

New Russian jokes were common in the form of anekdoti, but the image of a New Russian tended to be less common in more formal kinds of political satire. That was because those jokes were best suited to the form of the anekdoti, which takes as a central characteristic descriptions of absurd situations of power. New Russians, to average Russian man in the 1990s, were an absurdity on their own.

This is the first that I have mentioned adult men as a presence rather than as an absence in the 1990s. Most men who had been moderately successful during the Soviet period were no longer able to fulfill the roles they expected to fill in society and in the family. In the 1990s, the only means of accessing wealth required of all kinds of masculine participation was through the mafia or through active non-participation, actively undermining collectivity. All wealth was morally suspect in the 1990s, and at times the New Russian was simply any rich person. Primarily, however, he was in the mafia. As such, no form of proper, gendered participation was available to men. In order to readjust the meaning of masculine participation, average, non-mafia men had to readjust the meaning of power, and they did so through New Russian jokes.

Soviet Masculinity

After the war in Afghanistan, the Soviet economy was in trouble. In the 1970s, it had become increasingly inefficient and unsustainable. Oil revenue was used to keep outdated, Stalin-era factories open to maintain full employment, but

---

331 Rafael Reuveny, "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union."
those factories were a drain that prevented the economy from being able to adapt or modernize.\textsuperscript{332} That system worked when oil prices were high, which they were after the oil embargo in 1973. In the 1980s, oil fell, and only a few years later, so did the Soviet Union. With Shock Therapy, state subsidies disappeared and western goods appeared on the market. Soviet factories could not compete. Most workers were redundant.

Most people, in the 1990s, were thrown into extreme poverty, but a few people became incredibly rich. Most of them became rich through the process of privatization. Between 1992 and 1994, privatization was done through a voucher program, in which every citizen received a voucher to buy a share in state owned companies. Everyone received an equal number of vouchers, but most people did not get anything out of voucher privatization. Many people were poor, and needed money right away, or were uninformed about the program, and did not know what to do with their vouchers. Either way, vouchers were quickly bought up by just a few people. Most shares ended up with people who had been managing the companies they acquired, mid-to-high level Soviet bureaucrats, or with criminals and the mafia.

In 1995, Yeltsin and his administration needed money quickly, to run for reelection, so they came up with the loans-for-shares program. Through a series of rigged auctions, banks traded loans for temporary shares in some of the biggest state-owned companies. If the government defaulted on the loans, the bank would keep the businesses, which is exactly what happened, and what all involved had expected to

happen. Both systems concentrated the national wealth in the hands of just a few people, called oligarchs, who were mostly government officials, the friends and families of government officials, or criminals. Average people hated the oligarchs, because if you were not one, the 1990s were painful. The collapse of the economy and of society was often blamed on the oligarchs, for taking the national wealth from average people.\textsuperscript{333}

Almost all of the people who became powerful and wealthy in the 1990s were men, and much of the burden of the 1990s was placed on women.\textsuperscript{334} Nevertheless, the effect of the 1990s on the average man was at least more visible than the effect on the average woman. Men, in the 1990s, started dying more quickly and much younger than women. Over the course of the 1990s, Russia’s mortality rate jumped by 60%, and that increase was mostly among men. From 1990 to 1994, male life expectancy decreased from 63.8 to 57.7, while women’s decreased from 74.4 to 71.2, creating one of the largest gender gaps in mortality in the world.\textsuperscript{335}

Masculinity, in the Soviet period, was defined through work. Despite official rhetoric of gender equality, both the state and society continued to perpetuate the idea that the family was women’s sphere. While women were expected to participate in society and gain fulfillment both at work and through motherhood, as discussed in chapter two, men’s place of participation in society was only at work. Work was where they were supposed to find fulfillment in their lives, as well as advancement

\textsuperscript{333} See: Hoffman, \textit{The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia}.
\textsuperscript{335} David Zaridze, "Alcohol and Cause-Specific Mortality in Russia: A Retrospective Case-Control Study of 48557 Adult Deaths." pp 2201-14.
and power. Their role in the family was primarily through work, in that they were expected to act as breadwinners in order to participate in the family as fathers. Official Soviet images of masculinity often revolved around work, specifically through labor, and often physical labor that involved metal. Through that physical labor, men contributed, gained status, and supported families.336

For that reason, the idea of a disabled Soviet masculinity was essentially a contradiction in terms. In the first chapter, I mentioned the movie “The Story of a Real Man” as an example of the genre of healing literature, which served to provide an example to disabled veterans of World War II on how to properly heal and reintegrate into society, through which the state placed blame on veterans who could not follow that model. That movie stayed popular for the rest of the Soviet period, through the 1990s and up until 2014, when it was mentioned to me several times during my interviews in a variety of contexts.337 In the absence of working-age disabled World War II veterans learning how to readapt, the movie instead served as a more general instruction on how to be a ‘real man,’ which mean not being disabled. Fundamentally, the film presents remaining or being disabled as the opposite of ‘real’ masculinity.

In the 1990s, the Soviet state was gone, and with it subsidies for factories. Money was suddenly central to people’s lives.338 In the Soviet period, especially in the 1980s, money had not been all that important. Money was widely available and while goods were not. In the 1990s, foreign goods flooded the market and money lost

336 Lyon, ”Changing Family-State Boundaries: Who Raises the Children in Post-Soviet Russia?.”
337 Katya. Interview by author. (2014, July 18). St. Petersburg, Russia
its value. Work was not enough to buy basic necessities. Salaries did not rise in proportion to the plummeting value of the ruble.\footnote{Ibid. pp 71-90}

With the family as the only stable unit of society, and thus the only form of participation and fulfillment left to people, fatherhood was the only Soviet era form of participation available for men. That meant the economic support of a family, acting as breadwinner rather than as moral center. Hard work, or work at all, however, was no longer sufficient to fulfill that role. Access to wealth required corruption, crime, and greed, all fundamentally opposed to the idea of participation.

For most men, that kind of work for a salary, and for the economic support of the family, was not possible. Without work, without money, average men could not could not sufficiently contribute to society. Unlike women, they were unable to create a form of meaningful work. That this inability to engage in socially useful labor was experienced as disability is clear. The suicide rate in the 1990s went up dramatically, but primarily among men, as did alcoholism. In the 1990s, men were sick more often, they drank more often, and they died more often.\footnote{David Zaridze, "Alcohol and Cause-Specific Mortality in Russia: A Retrospective Case-Control Study of 48557 Adult Deaths." pp 2201-14.}

In Chapter 2, I described the widespread worry over the preservation of the family and the burden placed on women to keep it together. That burden was placed primarily on women at least somewhat because no one thought men could do that work.\footnote{Shiraev, "Gender Roles and Political Transformation."} In newspapers of this period, there were regularly articles about the problem of single mothers, and therefore about the absence of men. Men present and supportive in the family was a new ideal, but at the same time men were now
suddenly over present as well. Often, without work, men, with no other access to the power that they expected, tried to position themselves increasingly as authoritative in the context of the family. Domestic violence rates, like mortalities rates, also skyrocketed in the 1990s, and this, I suggest, should be seen as a means by which men tried to reassert patriarchal power in the context of the family.\textsuperscript{342} Both men’s presence and absence was a source of trauma for women.

In the 1990s, there was no proper place for men. They were unable to access old forms of work through paid labor, and without money were unable to fulfill their expected role as fathers and breadwinners in the family. The only form of socially useful labor possible in the 1990s, for many people, was the preservation of the family, but this was work done by women. No form of socially useful work, and thus no form of community or purpose, was available to most men. With no way of participating, men were isolated.

This made the situation of disability among men especially ambiguous. Most men had no access to work in the 1990s, and thus had limited work capacity. Most men were isolated. Men classified as disabled legally, when they were not veterans in the mafia, were not receiving sufficient pensions, and were therefore also not able to participate in the family. As such, the divide between a disabled man and abled man was blurred. Masculinity, in the 1990s, was traumatic, and disabled.

Trauma and the Mafia

\textsuperscript{342} Ashwin, \textit{Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia}. pp 2201-14.
In Yekaterinburg, there are two cemeteries at which gang members were buried in the 1990s. At both cemeteries, the graves of mafiosos stand out. In place of headstones, these graves are marked with full length portraits carved in black marble. The dead, in their portraits, are typically young. These men died violently. It was rare for a Mafioso of the 1990s to live into his 30s, to the point of reaching adulthood. Most strikingly, however, the dead are shown in conditions of material wealth, wearing expensive, tacky clothes. Sometimes, they are depicted with their cars. Wealth in the 1990s tended to be displayed conspicuously, despite the negative attitudes towards wealth held by most people. That wealth served as a way of signaling power in the context of the mafia, and as such this imagery of conspicuous consumption was directed at other mafiosos.

As I have said, the average Russian considered all wealth morally suspect in the 1990s. All of it originated in theft of some kind, and all forms of wealth were the same and equally criminal. All crime, whether it was government corruption, violent crime, or illegitimate business practices was attributed to the mafia.

The mafia, on the other hand, did not regard these things as at all equivalent. In interviews with journalists, they tended to strongly separate themselves off from other groups, especially businessmen. The businessman, even businessmen who ran companies that were fronts for the mafia, were described as essentially civilians, no different from any one else who was not in the mafia. While most people grouped all forms of wealth under the umbrella of New Russians, and often the ways of

---

344 Ibid.
345 Alexander Gentelev, "Thieves by Law,"(2010).
indicating wealth and power were the same for all rich Russians in the 1990s, the mafia presented itself as completely separate.

Journalists describe a sense that the mafiosos they spoke to regard them, and everyone else who was not in the mafia with a certain amount of disdain. For the mafia, emphasizing wealth and success were also a way of presenting themselves as superior to average people, who had not been smart enough to join the mafia. Stephen Handelman says that while he interviewed a crime-boss called ‘the Armenian,’ this man and the men who were with him were constantly openly hostile. The Armenian referred to Handelman using the informal ty for you, which is usually only used for close friends and family, or for women an adult speaks to a child.\(^{346}\) Part of the process of interviewing mafiosos, according to journalists, was that they would constantly emphasize their superiority. Often that was through references to extreme wealth and power, especially cryptic references to unknowable wealth and unknowable power. A other times, it was through threats, and through casual references to extreme violence.

The mafia in Russia during the 1990s was, in fact, incredibly violent. For most of the early 1990s, the mafia was in all out war, with violence especially concentrated in a few major cities, like St. Petersburg, Moscow, Yekaterinburg. One of the defining characteristics of the 1990s Russian mafia was its willingness to engage in violence, often unnecessary violence. In the 2010 documentary \textit{Thieves-in-Law}, one man described extreme violence in a casual tone of voice, with the implication that he hardly considered that violence unusual. In \textit{Kapitalizm}, Rose Brady says a racketeer

she met in 1994, Viktor, told her about murdering elderly people in order to steal their property. His account made her feel sick, the matter-of-fact tone that he used only made her feel worse.\textsuperscript{347} In \textit{Thieves-in-Law}, the Mafiosos seemed surprised that the violence they described was shocking to the interviewer.\textsuperscript{348} Viktor emphasized that this violence was normal to him: “Naturally, we put a stvol [automatic weapon] to his belly. We take him to his apartment, handcuff him, and start to beat him hard…And that’s it. Everything done correctly…More and more, we are trying to work without using force. It’s not profitable to use force.” In this way, Viktor implied he did not considered beating and threatening to kill people force. He then concluded, “Everything is more or less quiet, but we use guns. We kill. We kill. We kill.”\textsuperscript{349}

Journalists, however, also fairly consistently described thinking that the mafiosos they spoke were exaggerating at least their own personal involvement in that violence, both as a means of being shocking and to elevate their status. Rose Brady says she wondered how many people Viktor, who she says she thought was actually probably only a small time gangster, had actually killed, and if it was really none. This act of exaggerating to shock indicates that the sense of surprise, the belief that killing is “quiet” or not force was presumably feigned. By using violence to shock, they indicated that they are aware that it was shocking.

The purpose of this exaggeration and the casual tone was another means of trying to separate themselves from the journalist interviewing them. They referenced their wealth and power to indicate that they lived in a world that the journalist would

\textsuperscript{347} Brady, \textit{Kapitalizm}. p 152.
\textsuperscript{348} Gentelev, "Thieves by Law."
\textsuperscript{349} Brady, \textit{Kapitalizm}. p 153.
never be able to understand or access, by referencing things they knew the journalist would find horrifying as if it was completely normal to them, they presented themselves as completely unknowable to the journalist.\textsuperscript{350} Mafia violence, therefore, had drastically changed them, made them numb to horror, and isolated them from broader society. This, for the mafia, was a means of indicating superiority, through their participation in an isolated, underground community.

Rather than presenting themselves as businessmen, as part of the community, people doing a service in providing stability, the purpose of Mafioso self-presentation was quite specifically intended to making people hate them. During the interviews, they antagonized and threatened journalists, and never seemed to try to do anything but present themselves as anything other than destructive societal non-participants, through their descriptions of violence, through their wealth in a time of general poverty.

For this purpose, they also suggested that they did not work. In the documentary \textit{Thieves-in-Law}, one man extensively describes his success and power, and then added that he had never held a job in his adult life.\textsuperscript{351} Another said how happy he was that it was possible to become successful without working in Russia. In this way, mafiosos presented participation in the criminal subculture of the mafia as the opposite of work. This was also a means by which they separated themselves from businessmen, who at least tangentially participated in mainstream society. To fully and properly participate in the mafia as a community, to be superior and to

\textsuperscript{350} Ibid. p 153.
\textsuperscript{351} Gentelev, "Thieves by Law."
understand the life of people in the mafia, required completely isolation from mainstream society.

I described a similar use of a monotone, casual references to extreme violence in the previous chapter, when talking about representations of traumatized veterans in the 1980s. In both cases, the casual tone was meant to shock, and to isolate or to indicate isolation. Numbness to violence was one of the main indicators of PTSD among Afgantsy, and a means by which they were defined and defined themselves as outsiders and as victimized by the state. For Afgantsy and veterans of Chechnya, participation in the mafia was both a means and consequence of attempting to replacing the community of the army with a new form of participation, as well as for redefining their societally imposed trauma through traumatized community.

This positive imagery of collective trauma was also used in the mafia more broadly. Through this imagery, mafiosos were evoking imagery of collective trauma rather than isolating trauma. That imagery of trauma required defining participation in the mafia as participation in a society and community that was unintelligible to and isolated from outsiders. Thus, they redefined mainstream society as isolated from them, because they were the unified community in a period of turmoil.

Through emphasizing their non-participation and violence, mafiosos positioned themselves as a community through opposition to the broader community and to mainstream forms of masculine participation. Participation in the mafia, however, was not exactly a form of masculine participation. As I argued in the previous chapter, the mafia was primarily made up of isolated young men, not adult men. The mafia as a community was based around bonds of loyalty between young
men, particularly through imagery of combat brotherhood. Thus, mafia participation was based in an image of community as family, but mafiosos participated as children rather than as adult men or as fathers.

Most of the mafia was not made up of veterans, and not of disabled veterans, but in their self-presentation the mafia as a whole evoked the imagery of veterans trauma in order to define themselves as an outsider community actively rejecting mainstream society and mainstream forms of participation. The mafia was primarily made up of young men. In the context of the impossibility of Soviet masculinity in the 1990s, the mafia was the only form of community available to young men. As such, it functioned through the rejection of forms of adult masculinity in favor of forms of participation and community available to young men as young men.

The New Russian

The height of the Soviet anekdot was in the 1970s and early 1980s. At that point, forms of more formal creativity were state-controlled, and as such the anekdot served as an outlet for political satire, a way for people to express frustration and challenge state power. It was also a point during which official ideology and language of power felt most disconnected from the lives and experiences of average people. Anekdoty tended to engage with and subvert rhetoric of state power, redefining the language of Soviet propaganda to point out and address the

---

352 Michelle Smirnova, "Community through Comedy: Cultural Consciousness in the Russian Soviet Anekdot" (University of Maryland, 2013). pp 1-58.
incongruities and absurdities of the language of power. As such, the anekdot was simultaneously defined through engagement with language of power and through dismissiveness towards official ideology.\(^{354}\)

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the anekdot as a genre suffered. The availability of other forms of self-expression made the anekdot obsolete. If it was possible for a satirical show on television to openly mock Yeltsin for having a heart attack, there was little point in thinking up and telling an anekdot.\(^{355}\) Further, the anekdot engaged with the imagery of power, rather than with power itself. More serious criticism of the state relied on facts rather than jokes.

Sometimes, scholarship on anekdoty overemphasizes the degree to which they served as a form of resistance to Soviet authority. Anekdoty did, at times, serve as a form of resistance. They did not need to be written down, they were authorless, and they could be passed along quickly. As such, they were used as a means of critiquing the legitimacy of the Soviet state.\(^{356}\) However, their relationship with official power was more complex. Anekdoty were resistant to ideology, but they also engaged with it. In requiring a knowledge of Soviet state culture, they defined a form of community that engaged with state power.\(^{357}\) Anekdoty also served to define a community

---

\(^{354}\) Smirnova, "Community through Comedy: Cultural Consciousness in the Russian Soviet Anekdot." pp 71-90.


\(^{356}\) Elena Shmeleva, *Russkii Anekdot: Tekst I Rechavoi Zhanr*.

\(^{357}\) Zarubina, "The Culture of Laughter as a Factor of Tolerance toward New Social Groups in Russian Society."
through defining a racial, ethnic and gendered other. At times, they also served as a social corrective of improper forms of participation and engagement.

In the 1990s, the New Russian joke existed primarily in the form of the anekdot rather than through in other, more formal and authored forms of political satire. The New Russian joke, as an anekdot, engaged with language and imagery of power, considered incongruous and absurd. These jokes also functioned as a means of defining an insider community through the creation of the other.

Most New Russian jokes revolve on the New Russian’s conspicuous wealth:

A New Russian goes to a car dealer and demands a black Mercedes 600 with orange dots. The dealer replies, “But you just bought that exact Mercedes last week!” “I know,” says the New Russian, “but the ash tray is full.”

This joke relies on disgust at the way the New Russian spends his money. He has more money than he knows what to do with, and as such he wastes his money in a time of general poverty. The New Russian spends just to spend, and also to indicate wealth, as in the joke about the New Russian and his tie. The sense of absurdity in the New Russian joke results from the idea that only means of accessing wealth was through crime:

“How were you able to earn enough capital to start up your business?” “Well, to begin with I had to have a pistol.”

358 Smirnova, "Community through Comedy: Cultural Consciousness in the Russian Soviet Anekdot." pp 189-218
359 Ibid. pp 189-218.
361 Zarubina, "The Culture of Laughter as a Factor of Tolerance toward New Social Groups in Russian Society."
The problem of crime as a source of wealth is it was fundamentally counter-participatory. Through crime, and through wasteful, conspicuous wealth, New Russians prevented other men from accessing meaningful work through preventing them from accessing wealth. The problem with crime, which included government corruption, as a form of work in the New Russian joke was that it was considered a fundamental reason for the collapse of society in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and as such New Russian power was power and wealth acquired at the expense of society rather than for it:

A New Russian is playing host to his old friend at his dacha. The old friend asks: “Where did you get the money for our drinks?” “Do you see a bridge over the river there?” “No.” “That’s where the money came from that bought our drinks!”

The feeling of victimization and exploitation of the average Russian by the New Russian plays out on a micro level through interactions between the New Russian and the Old Russian. The Old Russian is in some ways his own stock joke character up for mockery, in jokes in which he represents the Soviet person failing to adjust to the reality of the 1990s. Often, however, he simply functions as the opposite of a New Russian, and thus as a stand in for the average Russian. The Old Russian is represented by his car in the same way that a New Russian is represented by his Mercedes. The Old Russian drives a Zaporozhets, a cheap Soviet car, indicating his moderate success during the Soviet era. Typically, the two meet when

---

362 Ibid.
363 Ibid.
the New Russian, driving recklessly, crashes into the Old Russian. Even though the crash is always the fault of the New Russian, it is the Old Russian that suffers, when the New Russian takes everything he has:

A Mercedes crashes into a Zaporozhets.
“So you are just a poor man?” the driver of the Mercedes asks. “Yes, I am.” “And you do not have any money?” “No, I do not.” “And you do not have a dacha?” “No, I do not.” “But surely you must have an apartment?” “Yes, I do.” “Well, then, it’s a deal.”

As I have argued, conspicuous wealth was employed as a means of self-isolating used by the mafia, that conspicuous wealth in a time of general poverty was an image of power in the mafia and an image of participation in an outsider community through isolation. Non-mafia men were unable to access power, masculinity or meaningful forms of participation due to lack of wealth. Wealth was a necessary component of power unavailable outside of the mafia. Because the mafia was one of the few available means of accessing power, the image of the Mafioso was an image of power. The absurdity of the language of power addressed in the New Russian joke was that the only means of access to power was through isolation from community and through an improper form of masculinity, young man’s brotherhood participation which necessarily required a rejection of forms of adult masculinity.

New Russian jokes served as a means of defining New Russians as other. Often, this was part of defining the absurdity of Mafioso power, by indicating that the only means of, and the result of, accessing wealth and power were through total isolation from the lives and concerns of average people. The lives of New Russians

364 Ibid.
and average Russians were completely disconnected, to the point that the New Russian fundamentally cannot understand the Old Russian:

A Mercedes collides with a Zaporozhets. A New Russian gets out of the Mercedes, spits, and says, ‘Eh, no big deal. Tomorrow I’ll buy a new one.’ But the owner of the Zaporozhets says with tears in his eyes, ‘I saved up my whole life for this car, and now it’s wrecked!’ The New Russian replies, ‘Why’d you buy such an expensive car, stupid?’

Sometimes, the average Russian is more specifically represented through a former school friend of the New Russian, an engineer, who has not been as successful. As such, the New Russian is isolated from some one who shares his background, and as such it is clear that a consequence of his wealth is that he no longer able to understand average people he used to relate to:

A New Russian meets and old classmate who has not been so successful. The New Russian spends an hour complaining about all the problems in his life, all his travel to European capitals, the tiresome visits to night clubs, the constant shopping, it’s exhausting.

“But enough about me,” the New Russian sighs, turning to his old friend. “How are you?”

“I haven’t eaten in a week,” his friend replies.

“That’s no way to live,” the New Russian replies in alarm. “You must force yourself.”

The New Russian existed in a completely other world. He did not understand average people’s lives, and entered them primarily as a destructive force. Thus, he was fundamentally isolated from the rest of society as a consequence of his extreme wealth. This isolation was also fundamental to the mafia’s image of power, in which

they define general society as isolated from their community through their wealth. In this form of the New Russian joke, who is isolated from whom, the Old Russian from the New or the New from Old, was again reversed. An experience of collective trauma was written onto the New Russian’s old friend, whose suffering is understood by the joke’s teller and audience but not by the isolated New Russian. As such, poverty in the 1990s was turned temporarily into a source of collective traumatic identity.

Sometimes, New Russian jokes took a more traditional approach to associating New Russians with the other. Some New Russian jokes were simply repurposed older jokes, in which the traditional Jewish caricature character has been subbed out for a New Russian.\(^{367}\) Others are more direct in their anti-Semitism, and the punch line of many New Russian jokes was simply that the New Russians was Jewish:

"A New Russian comes to an Old Jew and says: "Daddy, give me money"\(^{368}\)

New Russian jokes defined the New Russian as an outsider through improper participation. The New Russian’s wealth was an image of power, but an absurd one in that it was only accessible through an improper kind of masculinity, through not only not participating in the collective but through actively destroying the collective, and preventing other men from accessing work. The absurdity in the language of power addressed in New Russian jokes was the mafia’s imagery of traumatic isolation,

\(^{367}\) Zarubina, "The Culture of Laughter as a Factor of Tolerance toward New Social Groups in Russian Society." Smirnova, "Community through Comedy: Cultural Consciousness in the Russian Soviet Anekdot."

which in defining the mafia as an isolated community isolated non-mafia men. The New Russian joke defined outsiders and insiders through older forms of jokes about the other, positioning the New Russian as not ethnically Russian. It also used the same sense of mafioso unknowability used by the mafia towards journalists to define New Russians as outsiders to a traumatic experience, suggesting traumatic isolation in the 1990s as a potential source of collective trauma.

Addressing the Absurdity of Power

I refer to the New Russian as ‘he’ because they were necessarily always men. The female version of the New Russian was his wife, who was quite similar to him. At times, she was also the target jokes, often with added misogyny. Typically, however, jokes at the expense of the New Russian’s wife are nevertheless means of critiquing the improper behavior of New Russian men through their improper participation in the family.\(^{369}\)

The New Russian, unlike most men of the 1990s, should have had sufficient money to support and therefore participate in a family. Nevertheless, he was unable to do so:

A New Russian is asked, “What is success?” He answers, “Success is making more money than your wife can spend.”\(^{370}\)

\(^{369}\) Smirnova, "Community through Comedy: Cultural Consciousness in the Russian Soviet Anekdot."

The New Russian had a family, or at least a wife, but he regularly cheated on her. His wife cheated on him as well, often with the bodyguard he paid for. In these jokes, there was a sense that the New Russian did not control his wife, was not the head of his household, and was therefore not properly masculine. As a social corrective, the New Russian joke worked to create, against this image of the new Russian rejecting masculinity, an alternate image of masculinity as participant.

The New Russian was also an improper child:

A New Russian is talking on the phone. "Hello? Of course I recognize you. How are you doing? What? More money? You know it will affect your previous loan. How much do you want this time? No problem. I'll send my secretary right away with a credit agreement you have to sign. No, we can't do it without an agreement. You know business is business. So what about interest? Twenty-nine? Can you make it thirty-three? Okay, thirty-one and we'll call it even. I'll send it right away. Take care. Bye-bye, Mama.”

The New Russian’s improper participation in the family was part of the reason that New Russian’s power was incorrect or absurd. His relationship with his wife indicated an improper form of participation as father, and his relationship with his mother indicated improper loyalty as son.

The New Russian continued to have the same problems as average men did with access to masculinity, in that he did not enjoy the things money bought, he could not function as he was supposed to in his household. His wealth did not help him.

---

371 Zarubina, "The Culture of Laughter as a Factor of Tolerance toward New Social Groups in Russian Society."
Through these jokes, the New Russian was redefined not as powerful but as embarrassing. Often, jokes focused on how he spent too much time making more money to actually enjoy spending it:

A young woman is telling her girlfriend about the “New Russian” she met at a vacation resort. “Well, what is he like? What did you two do?” “Oh, the usual thing-- he spent the whole time in the apartment talking on his cell phone, and then on the last day he looked out the window and said ‘Well, what do you know? There’s a beach out there!’”

The New Russian’s relationship with work was therefore improper. The New Russian worked to the point that he could not enjoy life, which was no longer an acceptable way of approaching work by and after the late Soviet period. Essentially, the problem with the New Russian was that his wealth did not make his life better. His focus on money meant that he labored despite without working, and his labor prevented him from appreciating his wealth.

That the New Russian’s wealth was wasted was a common theme. The New Russian only valued things for their cost, and had no appreciation for them otherwise. Because of his wealth, the New Russian had access to forms of high culture, but only understood their price and not their intrinsic value:

A rich Russian goes into a gallery to get something for his wife's birthday. He dismisses the paintings costing only $1 million but finally settles for a Picasso costing $2 million. "Good," he says to himself. "I've got her a card. Now what am I going to buy for the present?"

---

372 Zarubina, "The Culture of Laughter as a Factor of Tolerance toward New Social Groups in Russian Society."
Usually, the New Russian lacked taste, and the things he bought, like the black Mercedes with orange dots of an earlier joke, were tacky. When the New Russian happened upon items of culture, the New Russian bought art for show and not for beauty. Sometimes, these jokes more specifically targeted the New Russian’s lack of knowledge:

A New Russian comes home after a trip to Paris. His wife asks him, “So how was it over there in Paris?” “Friggin’ cool, I mean, shit, that Feiffel Tower and everything, you know, oh man, I mean, friggin’ awesome! Vera, why’re you crying?” “It sounds so beautiful!”

In this joke, the New Russian was trying to appreciate something requiring culture, not for its price tag as in the Picasso joke, but for its beauty. Thus, the joke here functioned not based on the idea that the New Russian only valued things for their price, but on the fact that the New Russian had never heard of the Eiffel Tower and could not express the beauty of Paris except in a limited insufficient way. To the New Russian’s wife, however, even that insufficient explanation sounded beautiful. Thus, the joke was entirely based on the idea that the New Russian was too uncultured and too stupid to properly appreciate Paris.

The frame of reference for these jokes was never particularly obscure. The New Russian did not understand Picasso or Paris. These jokes were not mocking New Russians for being less cultured than the intelligentsia, but for being less cultured than the average Russian. As such, these jokes were a means by which the joke’s audience and its collective ‘we’ could feel superior to the New Russian. The average

---

Russian was made more deserving of the money that New Russians had: the Average Russian would only need one Mercedes, because he could clean the ashtray; he would go to the beach at a vacation resort, rather than focusing so heavily on money; he had heard of Paris.

The New Russian joke, therefore, served as a means of redefining power. Since the New Russian at its most basic, was a morally suspect rich person in a time of poverty, the New Russian’s incorrect relationship with money indicated that all money was held by those who did not deserve it. The language of power in the 1990s was redefined as incorrect power, held by the wrong people and in the wrong way. In a period in which lack of access to wealth meant that most men were isolated and unable to access work, wealth was redefined as embarrassing, indicative of stupidity. As such, the New Russian joke addressed the absurdity of power by redefining it.

Often, the Old Russian is only able to have power over the New Russian when the New Russian is dead:

A Mercedes rolling along at high speed crashes into a Zaporozhets and turns over. The driver of the Zaporozhets climbs out of his vehicle and gently knocks at the window of the Jeep: “Hey, is anyone alive in there?”—silence. “Hey, is anyone alive in there?”—silence. “Oh, thank God!” he says happily and backs quietly away. (Well, of course: otherwise, the wreck would have been fatal for the “old Russian”)

This joke seems to employ a trope of anekdoti, in which through common sense or folksy wisdom, the average (or stupid) stock character finds an unexpected, simple solution to a problem that more other people cannot see. In this case, however,

---

376 Zarubina, "The Culture of Laughter as a Factor of Tolerance toward New Social Groups in Russian Society."
the folksy wisdom and solution were simply the knowledge that it would be better if the New Russian were dead. This seems like a limited source of power, but a consistent feature of the New Russians was that they tended to die:

A “New Russian” and an engineer meet in the afterlife. And the “New Russian” starts to boast: “Yes, I had a great life... I had a three-story house, and an apartment in Paris, and a Mercedes 600, and a Lincoln too, and way too much money to count...” “I, on the other hand, died a natural death!” replies the engineer.

In this joke, the New Russian’s life has been made pointless through his death. New Russians were necessarily young people, and as I argued in the previous chapter, the death of a young person was an image of disability. Through loss of work capacity, and through non-participation, the New Russian’s wealth was made pointless in his unnatural death at a young age.

It is also significant that the person whose life, despite having less wealth than the New Russian, was better by virtue of a natural death was an engineer, an image of true, worthwhile work, strongly tied to official Soviet ideology and rhetoric and a Soviet concept of work. Even though the entire genre of anekdoti tended to function through mocking official Soviet language, in the context of a New Russian joke it was an engineer who represented the average person, and the proper way of living a life.

A new Russian is at the tax inspection office and is asked where he got the money for his Mercedes. “I had

---

378 Zarubina, "The Culture of Laughter as a Factor of Tolerance toward New Social Groups in Russian Society."
a BMW, which I sold. Got a little more money and bought a Mercedes.” “Where did you get the money for the BMW?” “Well, I had a Suzuki motorcycle, which I sold, got a little more money and bought the BMW.” “And where did you get the money for the motorcycle?” “Oh,” says the New Russian, “I already did my time for that!”

In the New Russian joke, the forms of crime and corruption that resulted in wealth in the 1990s, meaning government corruption, organized crime and semi-legitimate business, were all treated as the exact same thing. Each of them imply each other, being a business owner indicated being a Mafioso indicated being a corrupt government official. This was at least partly based in the reality of the 1990s. The business owner, Mafioso and government official were often all one person, or at least, all three of them vacationed on the same superyacht. The means by which each different forms of wealth and corruption were used to imply each other, however, meant the three can work against each other.

Specifically, oligarchs and mafiosos did not pay taxes, and the government was not able and did not try to make them do so. The tax inspection office and the corrupt government official were not necessarily different people, but in this genre of jokes, the New Russian had to hide his crimes to avoid being caught by the tax inspection office and had to trick them to avoid having to pay taxes. Thus, the figure of the tax office implies a government capable and willing to punish oligarchs, which did not really exist. This relationship with government corruption is out of step with the general cynicism of the New Russian joke. In using imagery of state power to represent an opponent to New Russians, the New Russian joke created an image of

---

379 Coalson, "Wild Capitalism Brings New Russian Anecdotes."
what should exist. The tax inspection office functioned as the stand in of the average Russian, proving the New Russian was criminal and then punishing him for it through forms of state power.

The new Russian had the wrong relationship with labor, the wrong relationship with work. He did not participate, and instead actively contributed to the collapse of community and society, as well as to other men’s poverty, and thus their inability to participate. As a consequence of wealth and power, the New Russian was isolated. He was so actively focused on money, and specifically on taking money from other people, that his money was wasted. The New Russian only understood price to the point that he did not understand the value of culture, of his own physical body, or of his life. The worst part of the New Russian, however, was that the New Russian was too poorly educated to register that his wealth was being wasted on him.

As a consequence of the nature of wealth and power in the 1990s, the New Russian was easily hated. Due to a lack of access to wealth and power, most men were unable to work, unable to participate, were isolated and were therefore in a place of functional disability. The means of accessing the wealth and power required of proper masculinity in the 1990s required not working, but laboring, not participating, becoming isolated. New Russians, therefore, represented the absurdity of the situation of patriarchal power in the 1990s. The means by which men could access power and masculinity required failing to be properly masculine. In order to address this absurdity, through New Russian jokes, average men redefined the 1990s into a cultural trauma, and wealth as a source of embarrassment.
Conclusion

In the mid-1990s, the popularity of New Russian jokes started to wane. Possibly, the New Russians learned to save a little bit, their wealth got a little less new, and they stopped being quite so conspicuous. Alternatively, imagery of extreme wealth simply became the norm, and everyone got used to seeing it. It was no longer a luxury, to wealthy Russians, to have a cell phone and multiple Mercedes 600s, but a requirement. As such, they tended to brag about it a bit less. Whatever the reason, in the mid-1990s, New Russian jokes stopped filling the need that they had been filling.

The mafia had always had a certain amount of mainstream appeal among young people, who had grown up in a period of intense isolation. Soviet masculinity was not an option for. Its foundations were not available, and as a means of accessing power it was nonfunctional. While young women had access to imagery of participation for adult women as mothers, young men who were not veterans did not have access to an image of mainstream adult masculinity. As such, the veteran’s image of Mafioso masculinity was appealing.

Further, the mafia was a tightly-knit community and a form of belonging. Without a strong sense that the mafia was inherently anti-social, non-participatory, it held appeal. It was not exactly that every young man joined the mafia in the 1990s, but quite a lot of them tried to pretend that they had, wearing flashy clothes and mimicking Mafioso behaviors they often picked up from imported American gangster movies. For consciously post-Soviet young people in the 1990s, looking like you had

---

380 Markowitz, Coming of Age in Post-Soviet Russia. pp 123-211.
money, and like you belonged to something, was a more significant marker of participation than emphasizing contribution to the common good.

In the 1990s, all forms of masculinity were traumatic. The old kind of masculinity, which had been inherently tied to Soviet state power, was in a state of crisis. Mainstream masculinity was traumatic through lack of access to the means of performing it. Outsider Mafioso masculinity was traumatic as a feature. The New Russian joke presented the New Russian, who was strongly tied with crime, as inherently unable to participate and inherently isolated as a consequence of wealth and power in the 1990s. The mafia presented itself in a similar way, through language of trauma and isolation from the rest of the community. Mafia trauma was collective, group identity-forming and thus fundamentally positive. It worked through isolation from the broader community, but in the absence of that broader community after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it served to disrupt society further. The New Russian joke attempted to address that absurdity, presenting the older kind of masculinity as more cultured, smarter and better equipped to use and value the forms of wealth and power wasted on the New Russian. Over the course of the 1990s, however, trauma became an inherent feature of power.
Traumatic Brotherhood and Traumatic Nationalism

In the 1990s, the new Russian government attempted to create a new kind of non-Soviet national identity. Other post-Soviet republics defined themselves through harkening back to a pre-Soviet past and defining the Soviet Union as a period of collective victimization. Russia, however, as the former imperial center of the Soviet Union had a more complicated relationship with its Soviet past. Yeltsin tried to define forms of collective identity, which were often unsuccessful.\(^{381}\)

Soviet identity was created through trauma. Shared experience of trauma were the basis of the meaning of community, where as the loss of position as participant in a community was experienced as isolating trauma, and thus as disability. For this reason, when Russians lost meaning in their forms of participation, identity, community and work, the 1990s were experienced as a period of isolating trauma.

In the 1990s, the family became the only form of participation that provided access to meaning, to community and to identity. The image of the intact family was an image of women’s participation. By focusing on childhood as an image of stability and morality, women found access to forms of participation through the work of creating the family as a stable unit in which women worked to protect their children.

through their ‘natural’ roles as care givers. The work of keeping the family together both fell primarily to women and was only available to women. Women’s participation was based on the ability to maintain the family through full personal sacrifice, without the help of men or the state. The family was a woman’s space.

As a space of community, however, the family was imperfect, and could be isolating, especially for disabled women and girls. Disabled women, without other available forms of social support or other communities of disabled women, were not able necessarily to create the conditions of the stable family on their own, and instead were potentially reliant on men, which was isolating.

Mothers of disabled children were also excluded from this community of women doing work against the period of isolation because they were considered, by abled mothers of abled children, to be contributing to the sources of the period of crisis. Mothers of disabled children therefore created their own communities of women who saw families of disabled children as similar to their own families, and therefore created networks which could provide the support necessary for mothers of disabled children to have access to the work of motherhood, and allowed mothers of disabled children to protect their children in the context of the home.

Soldiers’ mothers groups were another form of this kind of community of mothers of disabled children, but the context of their child’s disablement was different, creating a different form of required community. The dead soldier and the traumatized veteran both represented a woman’s loss of access to the work of motherhood through the loss of a child. Both images of loss represented a child removed from the home by the state, which prevented a woman from doing the work
of motherhood in preserving the family and safety of a child. Groups of soldiers’ mothers provided support to other mothers of disabled children by protesting the army as an institution destructive to the family through the image of maternal grief, and at times through actively removing their children from the army and placing them back in the home.

For young people, this form of community was at times limiting. Children and young people were stuck in the family, in the place of maternal preservation and care. Young abled women, in the family, had potential access to an image of adult participation as mothers, but this image was not available to young disabled women in the same way, because adult disabled women could not necessarily preserve and maintain a stable family unit only through a community of women, and so for disabled young women even the idea that participation and community might be available to them was a revelation.

Young men in general also did not have an available narrative of adult masculine forms of participation. Men, in the Soviet period, had participated in community primarily as workers, and the role of fathers as participants in the family was through economic support. In the 1990s, men did not have access to wealth and therefore to forms of meaningful work through the preservation of the family. As such, adult masculinity was fundamentally traumatic. Young men also experienced the 1990s as a period of isolation, with no narratives of adult participation available to them.

Veterans served as an alternative narrative of the family as a form of participation. Veterans, as lost, disabled children, represented the disrupted family,
and the unsafe, unprotected child. As such, they provided a form of traumatic community, formed between young men in war. This image, in the 1990s, became appealing to young men in the formulation of alternative forms of community, by specifically the Mafia. The mafia represented an image of the family based around brotherhood, rather than motherhood, in which young lost men created isolated communities fundamentally opposed to mainstream forms of participation.

In 1998, there was one last financial crash of the 1990s. The ruble devalued, more people lost their jobs and the country defaulted on its debts. Then, the economy began to recover surprisingly quickly. Oil prices in 1999 were rising, and for that reason the Russian economy improved. Ahead of the 2000 election, Yeltsin retired, positioning Vladimir Putin as his successor.\footnote{See: Lilia Shevtsova, \textit{Putin's Russia} (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 2005), Masha Gessen, \textit{The Man without a Face} (New York Riverhead Books, 2012). Lieven, \textit{Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power}, Mariusz Pilis, "Chechnya- the Dirty War." Politkovskaya, \textit{A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya}.}

In the imagery of the 2000s, Putin became the man who ended the chaotic period of the 1990s and restored order. In the 2000s, the isolating trauma of the 1990s became a collective trauma, through which emerged a new concept of Russianness. This new concept of participation, which allowed the 1990s to be redefined as community forming, created a new narrative of participation, in which isolated young men were morally victimized by non-Russians but remained loyal to other young Russian men. This narrative of national identity established a form of family based in ethnic nationalism, in which the family was formulated through the establishment of
the bonds between ethnically Russian men as a form of traumatic community of the 1990s.

Brotherhood and Masculine Participation

In the 14th episode of the 15 part television serial *Brigada*, Sasha Belyii is running for office. In a televised debate his opponent tries to reveal to the public information about Sasha’s criminal past. Though he is prevented from doing so, Sasha decides to reveal the truth about his past himself. Because of government corruption and a kind of moral victimization, he was a criminal. Ultimately, however, that is not important. He, like everyone else, wants to live in a better, and more stable country.

*Brigada*, which aired from 2002 to 2004, follows a group of young men who get involved with the mafia, because of the corruption and betrayal of the government. From there, Sasha and his group of friends, who call each other brothers, become the most powerful gang in Moscow. The series takes place over the period of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1990s. The series starts in 1987, when Sasha is returning from the Afghan war. The 14th episode takes place in 1999, when Sasha is elected to the Duma.

The focus of the series is on the gang’s leader, Sasha Belyi. The series focuses strongly and positively on the loyalty between Sasha and his brigade. Sasha,

---

as the leader, and functions primarily as an older brother. Sasha and his gang provide a largely positive image of the 1990s Mafioso, contrasted the image of the ‘New Russian’ type of mafioso that was still widely hated. The creator of the series, said that the purpose of the series was to present a narrative focused on loyalty as a positive characteristic.

Sasha’s loyalty is centrally to his ‘brothers,’ but more broadly his loyalty is nationalist, to the Russian nation. Sasha is not a Mafioso out to destroy community and steal from the Russian people. He is always willing to make less money for the sake of his loyalty, to his brothers or to his country. He refuses to sell drugs in Russia and he refuses to sell arms to Chechens. Sasha and his brigada are contrasted to more negative images of mafia participation, represented primarily by non-ethnic Russians.

The character Artur Veniaminovich, who is Jewish, represents the flashy New Russian image of the Mafia. He wears a red jacket, contrasted to the more restrained 2000s-era black suits worn by Sasha and his brigade. He is Western in his tastes, and leaves Russia to go to the America, after he talks about how much he likes the west. Portrayed more positively, but still indicating and improper form of participation, is Farkhad, who is Tajik, Sashsa’s old friends from the war in Afghanistan. Ultimately, Farkhas fails to be loyal to Sasha, which is the most important positive quality in Brigada, because he is loyal to elders rather than to his brothers. His overvaluation of

---

patriarchal authority is attributed to his ethnicity, in that Tajik culture is blamed for his adherence to an imagery of power based in masculine participation as father. 386

There is complexity to Sasha’s position as a member of a group of brothers. Sasha at times fills a role as father, partially through the fact that he is at first the only member of the gang to be a father in literal sense, and because he is the group’s leader. At times the members of his gang try to resist his authority or are disloyal. At the same time, his form of power is contrasted to the more directly patriarchal form presented as disloyalty through Farkhad. In the second to last episode of the series, Sasha gains political power, through appealing to the idea of stability. In that episode, however, the rest of Sasha’s gang is also killed, and the final episode consists of Sasha getting revenge for them and therefore giving up his political power. The most important role that he has, therefore, is not as a father, but as an older brother, loyal to his younger brothers.

*Brigada* is a retelling of the 1990s from the early 2000s. It provides a framework with which to understand the 1990s as a period of collectivizing trauma, in which ethnically Russian men remained participants in a community through ethnic nationalism and loyalty to brotherhood tied's formed through isolation and trauma. This is a fundamental redefinition of the nature of family, which combines images of the mafia and of veterans with the image of the ‘us’ of the New Russian joke. Isolation is attributed to victimization by an ethnic and racialized other, whose form of masculinity is overly concerned with wealth and improper. Proper masculinity, however, comes to be strongly tied with traumatic isolation.

386 Baer, "Fathers, Sons, and Brothers: Redeeming Patriarchal Authority in the Brigade." pp 217-47.
The first movie to create this image of the traumatic nationalist hero of the 1990s was *Brother*. The movie *Brother* was incredibly popular, and has already been mentioned in previous chapters, as a Russian version of the American gangster movie. The movie provided an image of masculinity and a new concept of traumatized purpose through the image of the isolated veteran that appealed to the general sense of isolation for young men of the 1990s. In 2000, Balabanov, the film’s director, made a sequel, *Brother 2*, which was also incredibly popular, but presents an entirely different image of masculinity, nationalism and purpose. Both *Brother* and *Brother 2* tapped into a changing narrative of masculinity, filling a general need which made them massively popular.

I described *Brother* in chapter 3. The movie follows a returning Chechen veteran, who goes to St. Petersburg to find his successful brother, a mafia hitman, and so also gets involved with the mafia. In the end, Danila takes out the mafia in St. Petersburg, who are all apparently not ethnically Russian, and rescues his brother before leaving for Moscow. In *Brother*, Danila is definitively isolated, and his isolation is what makes him uncorrupted by 1990s Russian society. The fact of the Chechen war is strongly present in the movie. Danila is a veteran. He tells his family that he never actually fought in the war, that he only sat at a desk the entire time, but that is clearly untrue. Danila’s isolation and his casual violence are images of a traumatized soldier, but his actual experience in the war are left vague. Danila’s racist nationalist belief system, which is at the core of the film and which is central to his appeal as a new form of purpose and masculinity, also come from being a traumatized

---

soldier. At the beginning of the movie, he threatens two Chechens, bragging about riding the bus without buying a ticket, and forces them to pay. The first Mafia boss Danila kills is ‘the Chechen.’ Despite being betrayed continuously by his brother, at the end of the movie Danila forgives him. Loyalty to his country, through ethnic nationalism and loyalty to family through his brother are fundamental to Danila’s image of traumatized participation and purpose.\textsuperscript{388}

Brother 2 came out in 2000. The second film was even more popular, and popular quotes from entered into general speech, especially among young men. Danila, in Brother 2,\textsuperscript{389} is a much simpler character. Instead of being childlike, philosophical and quiet, Danila is a confident and and ultra-competent superhuman character who even tends to order his older brother around. In Brother 2, Danila is less fundamentally isolated, and his status as a veteran is more explicitly clear. The movie begins when Danila is invited to be interviewed as a hero of the Chechen War and meets up with his old army buddies.

When one of them is murdered because of his dealings in the US with the Ukrainian mafia in Chicago, Danila goes to the US for revenge and justice. Brother 2 is both more specifically anti-American and even racist than the first movie. The hypocrisy and degradation of America is represented through a sense of ‘political correctness’ as hypocrisy, and through racist depictions of African Americans, whom appear primarily as pimps, gangsters and the homeless, whom Danila kills in order to protect a Russian woman. In the first Brother film, Danila’s racism is limited to

\textsuperscript{389} Aleksei Balabanov, "Brother 2,"(2000).
traditional targets of Russian racism, while in Brother 2 it extends to include all non-ethnic Russians. In the Brother films, villains are non-Russians and the heroes are Russians.  

In the movie’s climatic and most famous scene, Danila climbs up the fire escape of a sky scraper to finally confront the Chicago crime boss who killed his friend. When he gets there he confronts the American crime boss, laying out why the crime boss is not properly masculine according to Danila’s philosophy. Danila says:

“Tell me, American, what is power? Is it really money? […]
I think that power comes from being right. Whoever is right is more powerful. And you’ve deceived someone, and made a lot of money, but so what? Have you become more powerful? No, you have not. Because you’re not in the right. It’s the person you deceived who’s in the right, and he’s more powerful.”

Then he demands, in English, that the crime boss give over money that he took from Danila’s friend.

In this scene, Danila redefines power against money. He creates a different image of access to power, dependent not on money, which is what made mainstream Soviet masculinity impossible in the 1990s, but on ‘rightness’ and justice, which in Brother are strongly tied to loyalty to an imagined family based in ethnic nationalism.

In 1997, that image was just starting to take shape, possibly through the image of

---

391 Hashamova, Pride & Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film. pp 39-63.
Danila as isolated traumatic nationalist in the first *Brother* film. By 2000, this image was quite solidified, so that Danila could calmly declare himself and victimized participant young people as true power. Thus, in the Brother films and through the image of Danila, Balabanov creates an image of masculine participation in the family in which the family is based around traumatic imagery of brotherhood. From 1997 to 2000, this image of masculinity became more possible and definitive, and its nationalism became more aggressive.

Both of these images of masculinity of the 1990s and early 2000s are tied to the mafia, but the image of participation they present is not participation within the community of the mafia. Both Sasha and Danila are veterans, and their form of community is built around an image of traumatic brotherhood and loyalty between men, but as part of a broader national project opposed to moral and social instability and thus to the mafia. Their participation is based in an image of the family, in which bonds between men as brothers and loyalty to a family defined through ethnic nationalism becomes participation in a period of chaos and isolation.

Their form of participation is also necessarily tied to trauma. Both Sasha and Danila are isolated, and they are both veterans. Sasha’s isolation is the result of government corruption and instability, Danila’s original isolation in the first film was isolation from corrupted and corrupting society. The form of community they create and participate in was defined through the formation of community in the context of isolation and trauma, forms of artificial community and brotherhood associated with soldiers in the army. Their form of participation also reflects veterans’ rejection of adult masculinity. Both largely reject imagery of fatherhood. Danila, in the first
*Brother* movie is a younger brother, but by the second movie he functions as more of an older brother. Sasha’s conflict of proper forms of access to power is between acting as a father and acting as an older brother, and the series ultimately rejects imagery of fatherhood as a form of participation, positioning Sasha’s role as older brother as most important.

After *Brother 2*, Aleksei Balabanov’s next movie, *War*, specifically featured the second war in Chechnya. This film was the most definitively nationalist of the three Balabanov films I am describing here, and consists largely of Russians being victimized by Chechens. Sergei Badrov Jr’s character in the film is Captain Medvedev, a wounded Russian soldier held captive, along with the other characters in the movie, by a Chechen warlord. The Captain can barely move for the duration of the movie, but he nevertheless, and or even for that reason, functions as an image of idealized masculinity. The Captain is still and stoic, and inspires loyalty and traumatic brotherhood for the film’s main character Ivan.

While this image of traumatic brotherhood is primarily connected to veteran’s masculinity and primarily refers to non-literal bonds of loyalty between men, that is not the only context in which it exists. The movie *The Return* came out in 2005, and focuses on the relationship between two brothers, Andrei and Vanya, and their father. At the beginning of the film, Andrei and Vanya’s father returns after a twelve year absence and takes them on a fishing trip which turns into a trip to a remote

---

isolated island where the father has some kind of business. The father’s absence, the circumstances of his return and the business that he has to do are left ambiguous, though it is implied he spent his twelve years away in prison.397

The primary conflict of the film is between the two boys’ skewed images of their father. Andrei, the older boy, looks up to an idealized image of his father while Vanya fights with his father, whom he sees as cruel and abusive, and wonders if he might be planning on killing them. Neither image is exactly right. The father is distant, strange and often violent, but at the same time appears to be trying to make up for his absence. Throughout the film he tries to teach the boys, and especially Andrei, lesson in proper forms of masculinity through self-reliance and through taking on responsibility. At the same time, in teaching those lessons, he is unnecessarily cruel and impatient. The film’s climactic scene occurs after a particular tense conflict between the boys and their father. When the father threatens Andrei, Vanya pulls out a knife he stole from the father to protect him, and then runs away and climbs a tower on the island to get away. The father runs after him to try to protect him, but in the process falls to his death.

Throughout the film, Andrei often failed to take responsibility for his younger brother. In the beginning of the film, Andrei is disloyal. He leaves Vanya stranded at the top of a tower when he is too scared to jump from it, so that Vanya has to be saved by their mother, and then he calls Vanya a coward in order to impress his friends. After the death of their father, however, Andrei takes on responsibility for his brother, and employs the lessons of masculinity he has learned in order to transport

their father’s body off the island. Andrei’s new found maturity at the end of the film is not an acceptance of his father’s image of masculinity, however. Unlike their father, Andrei is patient and kind with his younger brother, rejecting the domineering aggressive kind of masculinity represented by his father. Rather than take on an image of masculinity through fatherhood, Andrei becomes a loyal older brother.\(^{398}\)

This lesson of loyal brotherhood, in *The Return*, is taught through trauma. The father’s death occurs on an isolated island, far away from community support. At the end of the film, after all the work of transporting him off the island, the boys lose their father’s body as their boat sinks. Through the loss of their father’s body, they lose the ability to make concrete their memory of the trip with their father, or even the reality of his return. As such, this traumatic experience becomes indescribable and inexpressible. Their experience is therefore isolating trauma, but through that shared experience of traumatic isolation they create a form of familial participation defined through loyalty between brothers.

These narratives of traumatic brotherhood are a means of reasserting a concept of masculinity, of adult masculinity through young man’s masculinity. Power, in this image is redefined away from imagery of mafia power based on isolation and rejection of collective participation, to define an alternative from which the Mafioso is isolated. Money, the absence of which was the source of men’s isolation in the 1990s, is redefined as improper power and false power. Fatherhood, a form of participation which had been rejected by isolated young men in the mafia,

and which was not available to most men, is also defined as improper. In its place, the proper form of masculine participation is a young man’s masculinity, and status as older brother. In part, this image of participation is taken from isolated, traumatized veterans and the mafia, which had been the only form of masculine participation available to young men, but images of participation in the mafia are also rejected for being isolating and non-participatory.

The difference between mafia masculinity as an improper masculinity and this form of masculine participation through traumatic loyalty of the 2000s is its nationalism. Traumatic brotherhood between young Russian men contributes to a broader nationalist project through the preservation of the Russian nation as a fraternal community. This image of the 1990s as a period in which loyal, participatory ethnically Russian men tried to preserve the Russian nation through loyalty to other men allows the 1990s to be redefined as a source of collective trauma, in which the experience of the isolating, disabling form of trauma of the 1990s was shared.

The imagery of mafia power, therefore, is redefined as improper, as non-participation, and is attributed to outsiders. In the same way that New Russian jokes served to define an insider community through attributing New Russian behaviors to an ethnic other, negative imagery of Mafia participation is attributed to Jews, Chechens and the west, who victimize and isolate ethnic Russians, creating the traumatic conditions of the 1990s.
As Yana Hashamova says in *Pride and Panic*, the only female character in these films is Mother Russia.\(^{399}\) While not literally true, it might as well be. In Brigada, relationships between men are the central focus of the show.\(^{400}\) In Balabanov’s movies, female characters function entirely as sexual objects. They are typically in some way victimized, and end up falling for or simply sleeping with whatever idealized image of nationalist masculinity Sergei Bodrov Jr. is playing at the time, and are used to indicate that his masculinity is ideal.\(^{401}\) In *The Return*, the focus of the film is on the relationship between the boys and their father. While the mother is at the center of their relationships and of the conflict of the film, her actual role is brief.\(^{402}\) In order for the boys to create this form of traumatic brotherhood, they must be removed from the family and from her care and protection. As such, women’s role as mothers is reduced.

Mothers of the National Family

For Katya in the 1990s, even though she was a doctor, it was a difficult process for her to find out information about the kind of lives disabled children could have. She only found that information when she actively sought it out. In order to seek it out required the realization that it was possible that she would have a disabled child, which was a life changing revelation. In the 2000s, the idea of having a

\(^{399}\) *Pride & Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film*. pp 19-39
\(^{400}\) "Resurrected Fathers and Resuscitated Sons: Homosocial Fantasies in the Return and Koktebel." pp 169-191
\(^{401}\) *Pride & Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film*. pp 39-63.
disabled children was no longer quite so impossible to young women. Evgenia is a young woman who works at the same institute as Katya.\textsuperscript{403} In 2008, Evgenia was in law school, when she became pregnant with her first child. Unlike Katya, Evgenia’s pregnancy was easy, and had no real complications. Her child was born healthy, and there was no reason for her to think that she might have a disabled child.

Evgenia described herself as a person who likes to be informed to a fault. She approached being pregnant in the same way that she approached one of her exams, wanting to know everything she possibly could about the process of pregnancy and its potential outcomes and complications. Evgenia said this approach made her unusual. Most other young women were satisfied with basic books about pregnancy and advice from their mothers, whereas Evgenia sought out scientific information about disease and disability. She wanted to know what would happen if her child was disabled, where she could go and what she would do.

In the course of her research, Evgenia found the Early Intervention Institute, a rehabilitation center which works with both disabled and abled children, and started working there part-time. She wanted practice caring for infants, abled and disabled, before she had her own child to care for. When she finished law school and her son was born, she went to work for the Early Intervention Institute full-time instead of becoming a lawyer.

One of the main differences between Evgenia and Katya is not just that Evgenia approached motherhood through meticulous research, but that for Evgenia in 2008, the possibility that her child might be disabled was not surprising. Evgenia

\textsuperscript{403} Evgenia. Interview by author. (2014, July 14) St. Petersburg, Russia
thought immediately about the possibility of having a disabled child, and the fact that
neither her mother nor her mother-in-law had any advice about raising a disabled
child was what set Evgenia off on her research. By rejecting the female community
provided by older women, she sought out and had access to the alternative
community that became available to mothers of disabled children in the 1990s.
Information about disabled children was readily available to Evgenia, and she began
working with disabled children as a way to understand her own future experience as
an abled mother of an abled child. Nataliya and Katya began working with disabled
children in periods of personal trauma, and because the experience was life changing
for them. Evgenia continued to work with disabled children after the birth of her son
because she enjoyed the work of motherhood. Motherhood of a disabled child was not
a different form of motherhood to her, it was simply a different available community
of knowledge.

Evgenia emphasized that her path to working with disabled children was
unusual, because other young mothers did not take that same path. She was also
unusual because while many young women began working with disabled children in
the early 2000s, unlike the women who worked with disabled children in the 1990s,
almost none of them were young mothers. Organizations that work with families of
disabled children, like the Early Intervention Institute and Downside Up, primarily
employ older women with adult children. Organizations, on the other hand, that work
with disabled children who are social orphans, who live in institutions for disabled
children, are almost entirely staffed and run by young women who were born in the late 1980s or early 1990s, and who are not themselves mothers.\textsuperscript{404}

Working with disabled children is no longer a vocation, exactly, for the women who do it. When Ekaterina graduated college, she did not know what she wanted to do with her life, and felt directionless. One of her college friends was running a charity in St. Petersburg which collected toys for disabled children in orphanages, and arranged trips of volunteers to go read to them. Ekaterina began volunteering with the organization just for something to do, and because she enjoyed the work. Working with disabled children had not been her expected career path. In 2012, Ekaterina’s friend got married, got pregnant, and decided to leave the organization. In her place, she asked Ekaterina to run the charity, and Ekaterina agreed.

Ekaterina did not plan to keep running the charity for long. She had worked there for a few years in 2014, but still felt adrift and did not know exactly what else she wanted to do. Charity work was a temporary plan. She knew at the very least she wanted a job that paid a little better, though after her experience with the charity, she hoped that her next job would still involve working with children. She did not, however, specify that she was interested in continuing to work with disabled children, the idea of working with disabled adults was not interesting to her.

For Ekaterina, working with disabled children was meaningful and valuable work to her, and work she enjoyed. Primarily, she enjoyed helping to provide a happier childhood to children, but unlike Katya or Natalya, she did not primarily

\textsuperscript{404} Irma. Interview by author. (2014, July 24) St. Petersburg, Russia, Elizabeta. Interview by author. (2014, June 17) Moscow, Russia
consider her work in terms of disability. It was also only temporary work, and a way, she said, that she was holding off on starting her adult life. Many women her age also worked in charitable organizations for a while, but like her friend they tended to quit once they got married and had a family. Ekaterina said that she loved working with children, but did not yet feel old enough to be a mother herself. As such, working with disabled children who were social orphans provided a form of access to motherhood for her, but only a temporary one.

While for older women, the decision to work with disabled children was a serious one, it was common for young women to volunteer with disabled children as an acceptable way to put off their adulthood. A young woman I met by chance, and who I explained my project to, immediately told me to interview her. 405 She, it turned out, sometimes volunteered with a group that coordinated trips for disabled children to the Russian Ethnographic museum, the only accessible museum in St. Petersburg. Her work with disabled children was not a significant part of her identity, but something to do on weekends, while she tried to find a ‘real’ job, possibly as a writer. She also worked for this organization because a friend of hers from college was running the charity. She, like Ekaterina, conceptualized her charity work primarily as work with especially disadvantaged children, not specifically work with disabled people. “Their lives are very sad,” she said, when I asked her why this kind of charity work was important to her, “and it’s important that they have some kind of real childhood. It feels good to see them happy.”

---

405 Anna. Interview by author. (2014, July 23) St. Petersburg, Russia
For this young woman, as for Ekaterina, disabled children were primarily children deserving of a childhood. They deserved access to the same forms of participation as abled children. These young women’s work was not focused on the preservation of creation of the family, and as such was not particularly focus on the issue of deinstitutionalization of disabled children, which was so important to older women who worked with disabled children. Instead, disabled, institutionalized children were a form of available motherhood, which did not translate to equivalent concern for disabled adults. For example, Ekaterina was surprised to realize she did not know what happened to the children that she worked with when they aged out of the child’s home, and had never thought about it.

Many young women worked with disabled children until they wanted to have their own children. Work with disabled children outside of the context of the family was an acceptable way for young women to postpone their own lives. This work was acceptable and enjoyable primarily because it was work with children who did not have their own families. Women working in organizations that worked with children with families described themselves as unusual,\(^\text{406}\) while women working with disabled children in orphanages described themselves as typical of their generation.\(^\text{407}\) Working with children without families, whether or not they are disabled, was acceptable work for young women. Once they had their own children, this work of surrogate motherhood was left to younger women.

\(^{406}\) Anna. Interview by author. (2014, July 23) St. Petersburg, Russia, Ekaterina. Interview by author. (2014, July 16) St. Petersburg, Russia

\(^{407}\) Evgenia. Interview by author. (2014, July 14) St. Petersburg, Russia, Maria. Interview by author. (2014, July 22) St. Petersburg, Russia
When I asked why almost no young men seem to work in organizations for disabled children, Ekaterina said, “It’s more unusual and more unacceptable for men to postpone their lives like that. For men, they’re expected to get out and start families and start working, which is less of a change. When women have children, it changes things more, so it makes sense that they would want to wait, travel and have adventures before they start families.”

This is a marked shift from the 1990s. In the 1990s, young women had more access to narratives of female participation, while young men felt that they were postponing their lives due to a lack of an accessible form of adult masculine participation. In the 2000s, the work of adult motherhood was all consuming for women, a point at which their ability to travel or access other forms of work stopped. Young men, however, were able to being their adult lives immediately, while they were still young men. Women in 2014 were more likely to feel directionless, and they approached creating meaning through forms of metaphorical motherhood, of motherhood of children outside of the family.

In 2012, the US passed the Magnitsky Act, placing sanctions against certain Russian officials for human rights violations that resulted in death of Russian lawyer and auditor Sergei Magnitsky. In response, the Russian Duma passed the Dima Yakovlev Act, which bans US citizens from adopting children from Russia. The law is named for a Russian orphan, adopted by an American family, who died from neglect.408

---

It is true that such incidences happened. In the 1990s adoption from Russia had very little to no oversight, and sometimes children were essentially sold to whomever would pay to adopt them, resulting in several high profile deaths and cases of abuse of Russian children abroad. The purpose of the law, however, was not exactly to prevent this incidents, but to respond to charges of human rights violations in Russia through suggesting that the Russian family was morally stronger, and that American families commit human rights violations against Russian children. It also contributes to a broader, national version of the image of wealth at the expense of morality is improper. Putin responded to criticism of the law by saying, “Probably there are quite a lot of places in the world where living standards are somewhat better than we have. And so what? Will we send all our children there? Perhaps we will move there ourselves?”  

Most criticism of the law has focused on the lives of disabled, institutionalized children in Russia. The face of the campaign against the law in the US is Tatyana McFadden, a disabled woman who was adopted from Russia in 1994 and who is now a Paralympic athlete, who competed at Sochi, representing a positive image of US adoption. Since the law was passed, there has been a fairly widespread campaign of deinstitutionalization, and money has been funneling into disabled athletics.  

In the 1990s, the work of motherhood changed drastically, becoming the work of preserving society rather than raising working citizens. In that image of the family,


410 Kelly Whiteside, "Russian Adoption Ban Upsets U.S. Paralympic Athletes," *USA Today*, Jan 5 2013.
disabled children were sometimes included. As such, with a transition towards a family defined through nationalism, disabled children also potentially fit in. The disabled adult could also be part of this conception of family, but through imagery of fraternal loyalty, and therefore this image of participation was essentially limited to certain men, primarily those disabled in war. By creating this image of isolated veteran as the national image of the family, women’s work as mothers tended to be marginalized.

Reclassifying the isolating trauma of the 1990s as a kind of collectivizing trauma involved the creation of a narrative of communal shared victimization, in which the perpetrators of the destruction of the community were remade into the west and non-Russians. Wealth became improper power, with morality and loyalty as true power and true participation. In that context, raising disabled, abandoned children in the context of an orphanage became meaningful work, the work of maintaining the Russian national family as a whole and as a moral institution.

Conclusion

The reinvention of the memory of the 1990s as a period of collective trauma redefines forms of available participation. This new image of participation is based around an image of ethnic nationalism in which traumatic bonds of loyalty are the main form of available participation for men, and which also serves to establish a concept of family based in ethnicity and ethnic nationalism.
This image participation combined the two competing forms of masculine participation of the 1990s, in order to recreate the 1990s as a period of collective trauma in which ethnic Russians were victimized by non-ethnic Russians. First, this narrative incorporates the idea that veterans, in being isolated, were uncorrupted, and second that they created a family based around bonds of loyalty between isolated men, formed through traumatic experience in which power was held by ‘older brothers’ rather than by fathers. Fatherhood and wealth, therefore were both defined as an improper form of masculine participation, because it they were both inaccessible to men or not conducive to the creation of a new concept of society and participation.

The image of brotherhood is necessarily connected to motherhood, in that ties of brotherhood are formed through sharing a mother, but this traumatic nationalist form of brotherhood occurs through isolating trauma, which requires a disrupted family. The nationalism of the image of traumatic brotherhood also positioned the shared mother as, first and foremost motherland. As such, women’s role in preserving the family was abstracted and given to men, who preserve it through loyalty to other men. Therefore, women’s role primary role as participants in this new image of an ethnic nationalist family is as mothers of the nation rather than as more literal mothers.

This image of the family as based in brotherhood necessarily privileges an image of the disrupted family, with children moved out of the sphere of protective motherhood. As such, disabled children’s place in the idea of the nationalist family has changed, and now loyalty to Russian children is valued, whether they are abled or
disabled. Communal mothering of disabled children is valued, but only so long as the disabled child is a child.
Disabled Sports Nationalism

In the 1980s, there were not many disabled athletes. In the 1990s, disabled sports became an image of independence, a means by which the lack of support provided to disabled people was justified. At the same time, disabled sports developed over the course of the 1990s as an available form of community for many disabled people. Since the mid-1990s, and increasingly in the 2000s, Russian disabled athletes began to represent Russia in international competitions, and this form of participation was centrally important to them as a means of defining themselves as participants in the community. This image of participation became possible in the context of the recreation of Russian national identity through familial ties.

The Soviet state poured money into athletics, and its many of its teams were consistently the best, or one of the best, in the world. Success in international sports competitions was an important image of Soviet success, and an important part of Soviet national identity.411 Russia lost a lot of ground in terms of sporting excellence in the post-Soviet period, but sports remained an important aspect of Russian nationalism. The only time that the Soviet Union hosted the Olympics was in 1980, in Moscow. In 2014, the Olympics were again hosted in Russia, in Sochi. In 1980, the

Soviet Union refused to hold the Paralympics, saying, “there are no invalids in the
USSR!” Because of that, the Sochi Paralympics were the first Paralympics to be
hosted in Russia. At the opening ceremony of the Sochi Paralympics, the IPC
president said that 30 years ago, “the prospect of Russia staging its first Paralympic
Games was nothing but a dream.” He called Sochi a barrier free environment and
said he hoped hosting the Paralympics would change Russia permanently.

Konstantin Vasilyev choreographed the opening ceremony for the Sochi
Paralympics along with Phil Hayes. Konstantin works for the Wheelchair Dance
Sport Federation in Russia. I met him at Dance on Wheels, a wheelchair dance school
in St. Petersburg, while two of his students were preparing for a competition that
weekend in Kazan. The Sochi Paralympics opening ceremony was called ‘Breaking
the Ice.’ According to the official press release, “the Opening Ceremony evoked the
spirit of Russia and the importance of breaking down barriers and stereotypes faced
by people around the world every day.” The show featured wheelchair dancers,
acrobats representing firebirds, and an icebreaker ship called ‘Peace,’ which
symbolized breaking down barriers. Konstantin said that this Paralympic opening
ceremony probably involved the most people of any Paralympic games, with about
100 wheelchair dancers and 200 abled dancers.

The opening ceremony of the Sochi Paralympics had more press coverage
than the Paralympics usually has, but not because it was an especially large

412 Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the
New Disability History."
413 "Putin: Sochi Olympics Opened Door to Russia, Showed Nothing to Fear".
414 "Sochi 2014 Paralympic Opening Ceremony Lights up Russia."
Paralympics. Between the closing of the abled Olympics on February 23rd and the opening of the Paralympics on March 7th, the little green men, Russian troops without insignia on their uniforms, occupied the parliament building in Crimea and scheduled a referendum for voting to join Russia for March 16th, sparking an international crisis. In protest, the US and the UK refused to send official delegations to the Paralympics. Up until just before the parade of nations, no one knew if the Ukrainian team would pull out. In protest, they sent only one athlete to represent the team to the parade.

The process of organizing the Paralympic opening ceremony was complex. The producers of the ceremony wanted to have wheelchair users representing all regions of Russia, or at least everywhere that had wheelchair dance teams. Konstantin conducted tryouts across the country, and did not take everyone who applied, even though they needed over 100 dancers. Some of the dancers were not all that experienced, especially the dancers from Sochi itself. The group practiced for several months to put the whole show together. In the end it was successful, actually so successful that the producer asked them to do it again. The night before the closing ceremony, Konstantin got a call congratulating him on the successful opening ceremony, and that now, the closing ceremony also wanted to do something like that, so could he just get 30 dancers together and teach them some quick choreography?

By that time, all but one of the dancers had already gone home. In the closing ceremony, a Paralympian climbed up a rope to change a sign from IMPOSSIBLE to I’M POSSIBLE. Konstantin’s 30 wheelchair dancers were there too, doing their

---

choreography. The theme of the show was going beyond the possible, which is also how it was put together so quickly. When I asked him he managed to get the dancers back, he said he honestly did not know.

For most of the Soviet period, images of disabled people, let alone positive images of disabled people, were few and far between. Starting in the 1990s, newspapers started occasionally printing positive pieces about disabled people. Those articles just about always focused on disabled sports, and on how disabled athletes were inspirational, when the inspirational model of disability had never really existed in Russia before.\footnote{Philips, "There Are No Invalids in the U.S.S.R!: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History."} This image of the lives of disabled people in the 1990s was fairly artificial, focusing on increasing rights of disabled people and their new independence in a time in which the lives of most disabled people had become significantly worse. At the same time, the fact that those articles were being written points to a massive shift in the meaning of disability in the 1990s. In the 1990s, positive images of disabled people focused on their participation in sports.

In the 1960s and 1970s, disabled activism started appearing, primarily among people who grew up in state institutions. Disabled rights groups sometimes worked through state approved programs and rhetoric, often encouraging disabled people to work. Others tended to align themselves more with dissidents. One avenue of disabled activism, which did not seem threatening to the state, was in disabled sports, which lined up with the idea of physical culture as a means for citizens to improve themselves.\footnote{Ibid.} In 1989, disability rights activists formed VOI, All-Russian
Organization of Invalids and began calling for rights more systematically. One of the first big efforts of disabled activism in post-Socialist Russia was a wheelchair marathon across the country, as a way of showing that disabled people were able to participate in society. Such marathons occurred yearly from 1992 on. Sarah Phillips, in *Disability and Mobile Citizenship in Post-socialist Ukraine*, talks about the idea of ‘mobile citizenship,’\(^{418}\) in which the idea mobility and active are a means by which disabled people present themselves as deserving of rights in Ukraine. This same language was also used in Russia, and one of the main ways people talked about ‘mobile citizenship’ was in the context of disabled sports.

Most disabled sports only arrived in Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For example, though wheelchair basketball as a sport has existed since the 1970s, it first arrived in Russia in the 1980s, and the first teams appeared in the last months of the Soviet period, and only in a few cities like Moscow, Leningrad, Yerevan, Kharkov, Kaunas. By the time that teams had arranged themselves into leagues, they lived in different countries.\(^{419}\) Over the 1990s, disabled sports in Russia developed. By the mid-1990s, Russian teams were competing on the international level.

According to Konstantin, at first, wheelchair dance was not difficult to start participating in, and often it was quite quick to start and get to the top of the sport. Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, in Russian and generally, that stopped being true, and now the sport is much more complex. Many people are wheelchair dancers and being able to compete on any sort of level requires years of practice. Originally, disabled sports in Russia only really existed in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but have

\(^{418}\) *Disability and Mobile Citizenship in Postsocialist Ukraine.*

been spreading, especially in the last five years. As disabled people become more visible generally, awareness of disabled sports becomes more widespread, and more people participate.420

A lot of the focus of positive images of disabled people participating in sports focused on their independence, their desire to have the right to work. They wanted to prove that they were capable of being independent, and did not ‘just want handouts.’ In the 1990s, the Russian government produced legislation on the protection of the rights of disabled people, including their right to work. That did not mean all that much. Disabled people had the right to work, but without state sponsored programs for disabled people they rarely found jobs. Without pensions from the state, disabled people who could not work safely had to work. Alla talks about the 1990s as a period in which, essentially, she felt like she lost the right not to work.421 Disabled people in the 1990s were freer and had more rights, but they were homeless, more people became disabled, medical care was unavailable, and disabled people died. The language of independence and the willingness to work were calls, when used by disabled people, for inclusion and access,422 but were used, along with the idea of rights and freedoms, as codes for abandonment and neglect.423

420 For other contexts of disabled sports see: Margaret Quinlan, "Narrating Lives and Raising Conciousness through Dance: The Performance of (Dis)Ability at Dancing Wheels" (Ohio University, 2009).
421 Alla. Interview by author. (2014, July 21). St. Petersburg, Russia
422 Philips, Disability and Mobile Citizenship in Postsocialist Ukraine.
Sochi was a very different context of disabled sports, and disabled Russians felt differently about it. Sochi was a place of nationalism, and thus of participation as ethnically Russian in representing the nation, a nationalist spectacle in which disabled people could take part. The Paralympics, therefore also served as a moment of participation for disabled people. Access to this nationalist imagery however, is gendered.

The Sochi Paralympics

Disabled people, in Russia, wanted to talk about Sochi. Almost everyone I spoke to thought of Sochi as incredibly important, especially anyone I met them through disabled sports. It was so universal I often used it as an ice breaker. Most people had stories about the Paralympics. Many had been there, or participated in some way. Most people said Sochi had changed their lives dramatically, that now everyone was excited and interested in disabled people. There was a general feeling that Sochi had changed everyone’s minds about disabled people completely, even disabled people who did not do sports, because now people knew disabled people were capable of anything.

Yulia, who I talked about in chapter two, participated in the torch relay for the Olympics, which she was extremely proud of. She was glad people saw her in it and kept a video of herself in the relay which she sent to me. She was chosen, along with quite a lot of other people, to participate in the torch relay for the Olympics after she submitted an application in which she said that it was important for her to show the
world that a wheelchair user could be “young, beautiful and active.” Essentially, Yulia put her participation in the Olympic torch relay in terms of active participation and gender as a disabled woman.

Yulia talked about sports and participation as central to her work generally. As I said in chapter 1, Yulia spent her childhood trapped in her home. Her work as a disability rights activist focused on providing children with the opportunities she had when she went to the United States, where she learned she had the right to not be bored. Most of Yulia’s work was with children, both abled and disabled. She said she worked primarily with children in order to change their minds about disabled people, since the minds of older people have already been made up.

“A lot of them have never heard of wheelchair basketball or other sports before we tell them,” she said. Yulia disliked talking about divides between abled and disabled people, emphasizing that much of her work was with abled children, and that the most important thing was including abled and disabled children together as one community. It was important to her that her work involved getting disabled and abled children together and teaching them both about forms of disabled participation, which often involved talking to them about disabled sports. This same desire to incorporate disabled people into the community is also why showing people that a disabled person could participate in an event of sports nationalism as a young and beautiful woman were important to her.

Alla, also mentioned in Chapter 2, was also an athlete, and her participation in wheelchair dance was a source of community for her. However, her sense of community was instead strongly tied to other disabled people, especially other
disabled women, who she met through wheelchair dance. Abled people are also involved in the sport of wheelchair dance, as certain dances involve abled and disabled partners, but Alla talked about the disabled women she met through wheelchair dance exclusively. She also mentioned that she knew many disabled people around the world, which was part of why she was interested in talking to me. Her interest and her sense of participation through wheelchair sports were through a global community of disabled people.

Both Yulia and Alla approached their relationship to disabled sports and disabled participation in sports primarily through disability. Alla described disabled sports as a source of community between her and other disabled people, and Yulia talked about how participation in the Olympics torch relay allowed her to represent herself to abled people as a disabled woman. Both Yulia and Alla primarily considered themselves and disabled women, and their community was made up of other disabled people.

Their relationships with nationalism and with disability were otherwise quite different. Alla expressed being angry when Russia was criticized in the US, and was more comfortable talking to me after I first talked about problems I had being disabled in the US. Once she felt comfortable in that way, however, Alla talked openly about things that were difficult for her, including and especially feeling unable to participate. One thing that was extremely upsetting to her was that before becoming disabled she had loved to go to the Hermitage, and now could not, because the building was inaccessible.
Yulia, on the other hand, had a strongly idealized image of the U.S., on which she based her activism. Her own patriotism was based around wanting to see Russia catch up to the US, which she did not believe it had. At the same time, she was much more hopeful than Alla about how far disabled people had come and how accepted they were in general society. While Yulia is an activist, Alla is not. Yulia primarily thinks often about presenting herself as an image of a disabled woman, whereas Alla tends to hide her wheelchair in pictures of herself. Nevertheless, they understand themselves in the same way in terms of participation in sports, first and foremost as disabled women.

One person for whom Sochi was absolutely not important was Aleksei, who works at the All-Russia Society for the Blind and is himself blind. When I asked him about Sochi, I framed my question differently than for other people. I first told him that other people I had spoken to had said that Sochi was very important for all disabled people, having changed many people’s minds, and I asked him if he thought that was true. He laughed at the idea. “Sorry, no,” he said, “I cannot imagine that was important. It does not show real change. That sort of thing is very superficial.”

Aleksei was a disabled child, disabled as a child. He fundamentally identified himself as first and foremost blind and then all the other things. As a disabled person, disabled from birth who grew up in the Soviet period, he had no interest in this sort of image of nationalism, of nationalist participation. These images of participation, he said, were not really a form of change for disabled people, only functioning as a

---

424 Aleksei. Interview by author. (2014, July 31). St. Petersburg, Russia
temporary space of disabled participation in nationalism, which did not interest him at all.

Other men were more invested in Sochi. I met Roman through the St. Petersburg Wheelchair Basketball team. I spoke with him immediately after his teams practice. I also spoke with the rest of the team, but Roman was the most forthcoming, and even he was largely unwilling to talk to me. One of the only topics he was really willing to talk about was Sochi. “Before, people were sometimes reacted like…” he said, and made a face, “But now they see me and think, oh he’s an athlete like we saw at Sochi! And they’re interested in that.” In the rest of the conversation, Roman largely denied that other people had ever responded to him negatively after all, saying that he never had any problems because in his day to day life he uses prostheses that make him able to go just about anywhere with no problem. As such, he emphasized himself as an athlete rather than as disabled.

Roman and his team had a strong sense of group identity. They formed immediately into a unit from which I was clearly an outsider. It was difficult to interview any of them, because they would not split off and together largely ignored me. Specifically, they tended to try to suggest that the main problem was language, saying things like ‘No, I do not want to talk, I do not speak English,’ even though I was speaking Russian.

Alexei was not at all nationalist, found nationalism insulting, and was not interested in it. He was also much older than Roman and his teammates, and unlike

425 Roman, Interview by author. (2014, August 4) St. Petersburg, Russia
426 Pavel, Dmitrii, Sergei, Mikhail, Nikolai. Interview by author. (2014, August 4) St. Petersburg, Russia
them he was not a disabled veteran, but had been blind from birth. Yulia’s relationship with nationalism is complex. While Yulia is deeply patriotic, she bases her patriotism off of her love of the United States. Alla’s patriotism was fairly casual. Varying levels of nationalism were in general a pretty good predictor of people’s relationship with sports as a form of participation, but gender was better.

Disabled men involved in sports, like Roman, saw themselves first as athletes and as Russian, not as disabled men. While Yulia and Alla said Sochi had caused abled people to see disabled people as capable of anything, Roman said that Sochi had caused abled people to see him as an athlete. The change had not been ‘now people understand that a disabled person can participate’ but that he was now seen as an athlete and as a potential Olympian, a person who represented Russia. Roman in particular was more willing to talk about being disabled with me than the rest of his team, but still emphasized that fundamentally through sports he is not really disabled even if sometimes people respond negatively to him because he is disabled.

Other members of his team did not mention being disabled at all. I asked all of them how they started playing wheelchair basketball. While Alla, for example, explained specifically where she heard about wheelchair dance when I asked her a similar question, the basketball team used the question primarily as a way of affirming their masculinity, saying “basketball is my life” and talking primarily about their athleticism, or their friends who played sports, while never mentioning being disabled. Their sense of community was the strongest of any group I spoke too, but they talked about themselves and their group primarily as men, basketball players and Russians, and never as disabled people.
Conclusion

Roman and his team’s sense of themselves as Russians and as athletes rather than as disabled is similar to the language used by young abled woman working with disabled children in 2014, who primarily saw their work as work with children. Ekaterina said she did not know what happened when the children she worked with aged out of her charity, and wanted to talk primarily about children rather than disability. Roman and his team wanted to talk about sports and brotherhood rather than about disability. When Roman talked about being disabled, it was in the context of his participation in sports causing him to not be viewed as disabled. Through sports and through imagery of brotherhood and nationalism, men, who were generally veterans, had access to an image of participation that caused them to not be disabled in the same way that orphaned disabled children became just orphaned children through a sense of being part of a national family.

Yulia and Alla did not have access to this image of participation. The image of traumatic, nationalist brotherhood provides men a form of acceptable disabled participation, through which disabled men can be masculine participants, but there is no equivalent disabled femininity. Women’s acceptable participation, as mothers, is not tied to disability in the way that masculinity is tied to trauma, and as such disabled women have no narrative of participation to use. As such, in the context of disabled sports as a form of nationalist participation, both seem themselves
fundamentally as part of an isolated community of disabled people, either as a member or as a representative for abled people.

This image of disabled participation is also only available to certain men. Roman and his team, as I said, were by and large veterans. Alexei regards the idea of disabled athletes as unimportant. Alexei is a man, but a blind man who has been blind from birth. Having been a disabled child rather than a wounded veteran, Alexei does not have access to this same narrative of traumatic masculinity and brotherhood, and thus to the same acceptable form of disabled participation through sports. Alexei’s rejection of nationalist masculinity and stronger association with other disabled people, specifically other blind people, also indicates a limit to the forms of acceptable disabled participation for people disabled as children. While disabled children might fit into a nationalist image of unified family, this place of participation is limited to their status as children and does not include them as disabled adults.

Disabled participation through sports is fundamentally gendered. Disabled men can become participants through sports because their participation in teams allows them to tap into a narrative of young, isolated, traumatized men as participants in the Russian nation. As such, through sports, disabled men become no longer disabled. Disabled women attempt to also use sports as a means of defining themselves as participants, but cannot access a similar narrative of disabled women’s participation. Instead, they use sports in order to create an alternative community or to represent themselves as deserving of access as disabled women. The use of these narratives of disabled participation as ability indicates that despite broad changes in the meaning of isolation, trauma, work and participation, disability remains a
fundamental means by which Russians understand their relationship to society, community and the state.
Works Cited

Primary Sources

Oral Interviews
Aleksei. Interview by author. (2014, July 31). St. Petersburg, Russia
Alla. Interview by author. (2014, July 21). St. Petersburg, Russia
Anna. Interview by author. (2014, July 23) St. Petersburg, Russia
Ekaterina. Interview by author. (2014, July 16) St. Petersburg, Russia
Elena. Interview by author. (2014, July 30) St. Petersburg, Russia
Elizabeta. Interview by author. (2014, June 17) Moscow, Russia
Evgenia. Interview by author. (2014, July 14) St. Petersburg, Russia
Irma. Interview by author. (2014, July 24) St. Petersburg, Russia
Konstantin. Interview by author. (2014, July 17) St. Petersburg, Russia
Katya. Interview by author. (2014, July 18). St. Petersburg, Russia
Maria. Interview by author. (2014, July 22) St. Petersburg, Russia
Nataliya. Interview by author. (2014, June 17) Moscow, Russia
Pavel, Dmitrii, Sergei, Mikhail, Nikolai. Interview by author. (2014, August 4) St. Petersburg, Russia
Roman, Interview by author. (2014, August 4) St. Petersburg, Russia
Viktoriya. Interview by author. (2014, July 28) St. Petersburg, Russia
Yulia. Interview by author. (2014, June 30) Moscow, Russia
Films


Documentaries and Memoirs


**News Articles**


"Sochi 2014 Paralympic Opening Ceremony Lights up Russia."


**Internet Sources and Misc.**


Date of Access: October, 2014.


Secondary Sources


Chirkova, Ol'ga. "Personazhi Ukhodiat Iz Basen: Istoki Sovremennogo Anekdota."


