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# “Dear Young Warriors”: Memories of Sacrifice, Debt and Youth Militarisation in Yeltsin’s Russia

## 1 Introduction: Investing in the future

Russia’s military institution was one of the biggest casualties of the economic and political crises of the early 1990s. Poor economic conditions resulted in budget cuts, reduced weaponry and inadequate training for recruits (Cooper 2006, 136; Herspring 2006, 515–516; Golts 2018, 6). Increasing reports of “dedovshchina” (the bullying of conscripts) and corruption hampered recruitment and increased draft dodging (Melnick 1994, 33–34; Odom 2000, 289; Herspring 2005, 609–610; Eichler 2012, 63).<sup>1</sup> *Glasnost* – Mikhail Gorbachev’s push for transparency between the government and society – unveiled military spending and fatalities, inspiring young historians to rewrite Great Patriotic War history, which challenged the memory of Russia’s most sacred event (Mathers 1995, 231).

Consequently, many scholars view Yeltsin’s presidency as an era of demilitarisation. While the “wild nineties” could have changed the role and image of the Russian armed forces, that change never came. Despite the military’s traumatic experience, notions that Russia remained vulnerable to external threats, and that defending the Motherland was a sacred and heroic act, remained strong. These twin narratives drove Russian militarism throughout the 1990s. Scholars of the Tsarist and Soviet eras have examined Russian/Soviet militarism from numerous perspectives that encompass civil-military relations, education and ceremonial events (Keep 1973; Taylor 2003; Odom 1976). However, the same attention has not been paid to militarism under Yeltsin.

I categorise the revival of the traditional Soviet Victory Day parade and associated rituals under Yeltsin as a turning point for the military institution. The 1995 Victory Day parade was the first national parade to commemorate the Great Patriotic War in the post-Soviet period.<sup>2</sup> State and veteran organisations used the May 9

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<sup>1</sup> Braithwaite, Rodric. “Dedovshchina: Bullying in the Russian Army.” *Open Democracy*, 9 March 2010, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/dedovshchina-bullying-in-russian-army/> (13 September 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The first Victory Day, commemorating the Great Patriotic War, took place on 24 June 1945. While localised celebrations took place yearly, national parades that adorned Moscow’s Red Square were only held on special anniversary dates, for example, 1965. In 1991, the Victory Day

holiday to reignite the nation's militaristic-patriotic spirit, especially among Russia's youth. Great Patriotic War memory has proven valuable to Russian authorities. As Olga Malinova (2017) notes, it has a "high level of social acceptance" because of its popularity with veterans and the families of the fallen. In addition, memory of the war has been used in society to historicise contemporary issues in Russia. Nina Tumarin (2003) observes that the Great Patriotic War gained its mythological status as it is easily used to legitimate and contextualise contemporary political complexities.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, that mythical status has increased with each passing year. In 1995, there was still a sizable veteran community, unlike today. Even in the 1990s, many young Russians relied on the stories of their surviving family members for their historical education. As veterans have passed away, the state has had an increasingly important role in preserving and using mythologised narratives of World War II.

Russia's youth were central to the country's militarisation goals in the 1990s. Cultural militarisation – here I draw on the work of Joanna Waley-Cohen (2009), Henry Giroux (2008) and Catherine Lutz (2002) – acted in the Yeltsin era as a form of public pedagogy. Such militarisation transcended "true military purposes" (Vagts 1959, 13). By exploring this phenomenon across all strata of society – in discussions in the State Duma, in political speeches about the 1995 Victory Day parade, and in school textbooks published during the 1990s – I conclude that, throughout the 1990s, Russia's youth were deluged with traditional militarised discourses that emphasised sacrifice, state loyalty and heroism. Inspired by Tumarin's (1994) notion of generational debt owed by younger generations to their veteran (or, indeed, non-veteran) forebears, I assess militarisation through a debt-militarisation paradigm, showing the role that the paradigm played in the 1990s' commemorative discourse. Through stories of martyred ancestors and youth's indebtedness, youth were burdened with a debt that could only be repaid through young people's participation in current and future commemorative activities, transmission of the heroic narrative and willingness to repeat their ancestors' sacrifices. However, the nature of the commemorative practices at hand meant that the debt could never be repaid: the annual return of Victory Day ensured that narratives of sacrifice, loyalty and societal indebtedness would return year after year.

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parade ceased to exist on a national level and was revived in 1995 on what would then become an annual national celebration.

<sup>3</sup> See the chapter on Holocaust education in Russia in this volume, which highlights the use of memory as a prophylactic: to learn from the mistakes of the past was to prevent that event happening again.

## 2 Sacrifice and loyalty: Commemoration as currency?

Sacrifice and loyalty were prominent themes across Russia’s educational and commemorative landscape in the 1990s. Emphasis on Russia’s present and future generations’ indebtedness to the heroic wartime actions of historical figures and veterans established society’s responsibility to commemorate. The Great Patriotic War’s particular ability to generate this debt is best demonstrated in Yeltsin’s use of this “chosen glory” in commemorative and educative practices. Representations of the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany draw on militaristic-patriotic themes of victory, defence and heroism.<sup>4</sup> The Great Patriotic War used alongside “debt” analogies served to embed militarised themes into Russian society, inserting them, beyond memory of the victory itself, into ideas of civic duty and responsibility. Given World War II’s prominence in this debt cycle, the Victory Day parade’s return in 1995 – and associated events – serves as rich case studies for my approach. The anniversary events catalysed the regular exposure of Russia’s youth to a comprehensive educational program of militarised patriotism premised on establishing debt.

### 2.1 Building debt

Boris Yeltsin’s state mobilised Victory Day to promote ideas of sacrifice, state loyalty and heroism across both educational and commemorative spaces, aiming to instil militarised-patriotic narratives in Russians and especially in young Russians. Each narrative conveyed veterans’ sacrifices and the youth’s debt to those sacrifices. Young people were charged with a moral obligation to perpetually commemorate victory, which is a form of militarisation that asks individuals to support military ideals and glorify the military’s historic achievements. By encouraging this militarisation across Russian society, the state reinforced the military’s position in contemporary identity.

In a speech at the 1995 Victory Day parade on Red Square, Boris Yeltsin emphasised the veteran’s sacrifice in World War II, as having paid an “unprecedented

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<sup>4</sup> “Dokumenty k Federal’nomu zakonu ot 19 Maya 1995 g. No 80-F3 ‘Ob uverkovochenii Pobedy sovetskogo naroda v Velikoy Otechestvennoy Voiny v 1941–1945 gg.’ (Proekty zakona, postanovleniya, pojasnitel’naya zapiska, zaklucheniye, informatsii i dr.)” F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 989, 1.2, GARF, Moscow, 1993–1995.

price”.<sup>5</sup> Yeltsin’s words are emblematic of how veterans’ sacrifice and loyalty in the Great Patriotic War became a central theme of the commemorative event. At an award ceremony on 27 April 1995, Yeltsin also noted the “incredible hardships and sufferings [that] fell on the shoulders of the [wartime] generations”.<sup>6</sup> The Great Patriotic War was emphasised as “never seen before”, with descriptors like “unprecedented” highlighting the unique nature of the war. Discourses like this were even shared across political camps: Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov echoed Yeltsin’s words to declare that “In the history of the twentieth century, there is no more significant and memorable event than the victory of the Soviet people and their allies over Hitler’s fascism in the Great Patriotic War.”<sup>7</sup>

By highlighting the enormity of the war in 1995, political elites and veterans’ and military organisations added value to self-sacrifice, cementing society’s obligation to commemorate the war. In a draft law *On Perpetuating the Victory of the Soviet People in the Great Patriotic War, 1941–1945*, State Duma representatives Alevita Aparina and Anatoly Lukyanov noted that “the anniversary of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Victory of the Soviet people over Nazism obliges us to take this federal law into force and to apply it to 9 May 1995”.<sup>8</sup>

In the next phase of the process, the veteran was central. Political elites like Yeltsin described the Soviet Union’s victory over Nazi Germany as “immortal” and “courageous”.<sup>9</sup> In a speech to veterans receiving the Order of Zhukov on 5 May 1995, Yeltsin explained that “the war is in the past, but its memory is timeless; the immortal feat of soldiers and underground commanders and the partisans of the Workers [. . .] who all ensured the defeat of the Nazi hordes; we will always remember the enormous efforts of deprivation and sacrifice, [in

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5 “Vystuplenie prezidenta RF B. N. El’tsina na Krasnoy ploshchadi, na parade, posvyashchenom 50-letiyu pobedy v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne.” F. 21 Op. 1 d. 130, Yeltsin Center, 09 May 1995, <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/audio/64420/> (13 May 2021).

6 “Vrucheniye gosudarstvennykh nagrad prezidentom RF B.N. El’tsinym.” F. 21, Op. 1, d. 126, Yeltsin Center, 27 April 1995, [https://yeltsin.ru/archive/audio/64416](https://yeltsin.ru/archive/audio/64416/) (12 November 2021).

7 F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, GARF, Moscow, February–March 1995.

8 F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 989, l. 2, GARF, 1995. This law was adopted by the State Duma on 19 April 1995 and came into effect on 19 May 1995. It was associated with participants of the Great Patriotic War and covered commemoration celebrations, social welfare and search work for missing persons. This particular document was a project launched by State Duma deputies Aparina and Lukyanov.

9 “Vrucheniye prezidentom RF B.N. El’tsinym gosudarstvennykh nagrad – ordena G.K. Zhukova, v svyazi s 50-letiyem pobedy v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne.” F. 21 Op. 1 d. 128, Yeltsin Center, 5 May 1995, [https://yeltsin.ru/archive/audio/64418](https://yeltsin.ru/archive/audio/64418/) (12 November 2021); F. 10100, Op 1, d. 1003, 37–38, GARF, February–March 1995; “Dokumenty o podgotovke i prazdnovanii 50-letiya Pobedy v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne (obrashcheniya, zayavleniya, perepiska i dr.)” F. 10100, Op. 2, d. 135, GARF, Moscow, 1 March 1995; F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l. 37, GARF, February–March 1995.

which] the Great Victory was achieved”.<sup>10</sup> Framing war-induced fatalities as sacrifice was not a new phenomenon of the Yeltsin period. Varley notes that this took place in the nineteenth century, when the idea of inevitable war-death was replaced by emphasising soldier sacrifice to defend values.<sup>11</sup> Of course, after the USSR’s collapse, the defence of the Soviet Union and the communist values it upheld could not remain central to the commemorative date. Instead, the state shifted Great Patriotic War narratives towards the veterans, providing the youth with a viable role model, someone who, through sacrifice and loyalty to the state, was worthy of national remembrance.

Hero worship was (and remains) an important part of Russia’s commemorative and educative landscape. Even before the 1995 parade, the history classroom exposed children to epic narratives of Russian heroism stretching back to Kievan Rus (Golovin 1992, 15; Dvornichenko et al. 1999, 42–43; Vedernikov 1997, 972). Russian historical textbooks described key figures as “heroes”, “brave” and “fearless” (Ishimova 1996, 21–22; Skrynnikov 1997, 15). Typically, loyalty to the nation was a major part of a hero’s feat. Textbook authors Valery Ostrovskiy and Anatoly Utkin (1996) noted that when it came to the Great Patriotic War, “people were not afraid of fighting for the freedom of the Fatherland”, and that “the popular militia, while badly armed and untrained, went to fight knowing they faced certain death but would delay the enemy by hours and days”.

When it came to World War II, words like “unprecedented” and “immortal” presented an exceptional and heroic veteran and categorised the experience of the Great Patriotic War as something the civilian – and subsequent generations – could not fully comprehend or replicate. In a letter to a World War II veteran written before the 1996 Victory Day, Boris Yeltsin emphasised this distancing: “The children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of those who fought on the battlefields and did not sleep on the labour-front will never be able to do [defeat fascism].”<sup>12</sup> Kate McLoughlin (2011) draws on Carolin Emcke’s “burden of witness”, explaining that a spectator’s observation of a conflict (or, here, of accounts about a conflict) can bring about feelings of failure, since they are unable to help those who fought. The idea helps us understand the significance of Yeltsin’s approach. In this sense, commemoration participants were paying for it with the next best thing – through the perpetuation of their

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**10** F. 21 Op. 1, d. 128, Yeltsin Center, 5 May 1995.

**11** Varley, Karine. “How Should We Commemorate Wars? Lessons from the Nineteenth Century.” *History and Policy*, 4 August 2014, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/how-should-we-commemorate-wars-lessons-from-the-nineteenth-century> (13 May 2021).

**12** “Ilyushin V. Ob izgotovlenii pisem veteranam VOV s obraztsami otkrytok.” F. 6, Op. 1, d. 102, Yeltsin Center, 15 April 1996, <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/10624> (11 November 2021).

memory. Unfortunately, since this form of payment would not change the course or outcome of the war, save lives or stop further destruction, they were required to pay continual respects to those who did see action.

Like Aparina, Lukyanov and Yeltsin, other political figures issued statements centred on veteran sacrifice with a special emphasis on society's indebtedness to their ancestors. For example, the Faction President of the All-Russian Volunteers of Victory announced that: "The current generations of Russian citizens, like other post-Soviet States, remain indebted to the heroic warriors and the workers of the rear."<sup>13</sup> In March 1995 State Duma chairman Ivan Rubkin encouraged society to "remember the names of the courageous sons and daughters of the Motherland, who gave their dearest life for the sake and freedom of the Motherland", while in February 1995 a speaker at the so-called "Meeting for the Heroes of the Soviet Union" noted that these martyrs "deserve honour and respect".<sup>14</sup> In a letter to a Great Patriotic War veteran in 1996, President Yeltsin noted the present generation's responsibility to the martyrs of the past, suggesting that the act of remembering itself was an important obligation: "We the children of the war, the younger generation, sacredly honour its [Great Patriotic War's] lessons and remember the whole bitter truth of the war."<sup>15</sup> These statements are indicative of how narratives shared around Victory Day and in textbooks were used to impress ideas of duty – especially the responsibility to continually commemorate the past – onto Russians. While not focused exclusively on the Great Patriotic War, school textbooks further promoted knowledge of Russia's history and the current generations' pride in the "glorious exploits" of their ancestors.

The commemorative events of the Yeltsin era were structured so that the population was overwhelmed with militarised narratives. When Victory Day became a national holiday in 1995, barriers that might previously have hindered public participation were removed.<sup>16</sup> Concurrent statements that Victory Day "will be a day of remembrance for all of us" shifted the duty of commemoration onto wider society.<sup>17</sup> Duty was in turn reinforced in other areas of society. A federal law of 1995 declared, "caring for participants and victims of war is a historical duty of society and the state".<sup>18</sup> Again, robust ideas of duty compelled society to take an active role in the memorialisation.

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<sup>13</sup> F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l.24, GARF, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 135, GARF, 1995; F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l. 37, GARF, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> F. 6, Op. 1, d. 102, Yeltsin Center, 15 April 1996.

<sup>16</sup> F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 989, l. 2, GARF, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> F. 21 Op. 1, d. 128, Yeltsin Center, 5 May 1995.

<sup>18</sup> F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 989, l. 2, GARF, 1995.

## 2.2 Debt collecting

The 1995 Victory Day was instrumental in the militarisation of youth. As “key agents of social and political change”, the country’s younger generations would play an important role in the continued memorialisation of the war and in the government’s wider militarisation efforts (McKenzie and Marks 1998, 222). Commemorating the war, learning more about history, and showing willingness to sacrifice themselves were suggested as the only ways for younger generations to “repay” the debt to those who had achieved victory against Nazi Germany. The Russian government aimed to shame its citizens into participating in military-patriotic activities: their ancestors made sacrifices, and therefore they should too. The government hoped to use debt and memory as bargaining tools. The elaborate parades showcased exciting military technology and the flood of heroic tales were capable of improving the military’s image. The state, then, was using war commemoration to popularise the armed forces, countering increasing draft dodging as “dedovshchina” became endemic in the army.

The discourse around Victory Day 1995 established expectations for the future and shifted responsibility for memory onto Russia’s young population. A key facet of this shift of responsibility was the connection of physical labour and education. The exhumation and internment of unidentified corpses from the war was a particularly significant task that involved young Russians. One proposed law underlined the importance of this activity: “One of the most important tasks to perpetuate the memory of the defenders of the fatherland is to carry out a search work on the establishment of the fate of the soldiers who were missing during the Great Patriotic War.”<sup>19</sup> Yuri Yarov, Deputy Prime Minister from 1992 to 1996, directed the Interdepartmental Commissions for the Social Affairs of Servicemen and their Family Members (now the commission of Veteran affairs). Yarov addressed the republics’ government chairmen and regions and autonomous entities administrative heads in a letter, calling for improved material and technical support for those identifying battlefield remains. He suggested creating a regional and national “memory watch” organisation to examine and certify military graves.<sup>20</sup>

Similar projects took on many forms. In connection with the 1995 fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, State Duma deputy Vladimir Volkov called for young people to work on the burial of remains and cleaning of monuments, memorial plaques, and busts of heroes.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the debt of the youth to

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<sup>19</sup> F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 989, l. 14, GARF, 1993–1995.

<sup>20</sup> F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l. 91, GARF, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l. 28, GARF; 1995.

veterans and the fallen could be paid off through activity that entailed labour and developing an understanding of both the historical event and those who participated within it.

Volkov also called on Russian youths to connect with veterans: “It’s time to restore the link between our eras.” Volkov suggested young people should hold concerts and parties for the veterans.<sup>22</sup> This sort of connection was based on the hope that veterans would be able to educate Russia’s youth with the values that they displayed during the war. Intergenerational connection was an opportunity for veterans to impart their values and worldviews onto younger generations (Khrystanovskaya and White 2003, 289–306; Werning Rivera and Rivera 2006, 125–144; Renz 2006, 903–924).

This phenomenon was particularly evident in 1995. Many young Russians were invited to visit Vladivostok in September 1995 for a gathering of veterans who had fought against Japan. At the event, Boris Yeltsin explained the importance of connection between generations for memory and value transmission:

I am grateful to you, dear veterans, for your unparalleled courage and heroism, for your victory. Your knowledge and experience, the traditions of sons’ love for their native land, hardened in fierce battles, are very important today for our people, especially for the young defenders of the fatherland, all the youth. I am glad that the link between generations has not been interrupted, that mutual understanding is growing between Russians of all ages; your meeting is clear confirmation of this.<sup>23</sup>

The sacrifices of the veteran community were what supposedly made them worthy of younger Russians’ respect. Boris Yeltsin highlighted this issue again in 1996, revealing that the fiftieth anniversary of 1945 had not been a flash in the pan – the events would be continually repeated. In preparation for the Day of Remembrance and Sorrow (usually remembered on the 22 June), Yeltsin addressed residents of Russia’s hero-cities (for example, Novgorod, Tula and Smolensk)<sup>24</sup> and those cities that had been occupied by the German military in a telegram of 21 June 1996:

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<sup>22</sup> F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l. 28, GARF, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> “Prezident RF El’tsin B.N. Privetstviye uchastnikam Vserossiyskoy vstrechi veteranov boyev s Yaponiyey v gody vtoroy mirovoy voyny s molodezh’yu i lichnym sostavom Tikhookeanskogo flota (kopiya).” F. 6, Op. 1, d. 125, l. 156, Yeltsin Center, 2 September 1995, <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/12143> (11 November 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Hero-city, “gorod-geroy”, is a title awarded to cities where significant events of the Great Patriotic War took place, and where citizens of this city performed heroic actions to hinder the advancements and defeat Nazi Germany. Leningrad, for example, is a hero city because of the Leningrad Siege of 1941–1944.



In our country, there is hardly a family that would not have experienced the burden and hardships of war, that would not have sent their breadwinners, sons and daughters to defend the Fatherland. Not all of them returned from the battlefield. Therefore, for every Russian, every Russian family, this day has a special, tragic ring to it.

The memory of war is especially vivid among those who survived the occupation: remember the executions and the gallows and the trains that took their loved ones to fascist slavery.

Remembering today those who defended the freedom and independence of our homeland, we cannot but recall the partisans, underground fighters, and every civilian of the temporarily occupied cities, all of whose lives were cut short by the enemy.

Eternal glory and eternal peace to all unconquered and unbroken!<sup>25</sup>

The cultivation of the ideas that veterans were innately “deserving of respect” due to their past sacrifices strengthened the idea that society was in debt. Political and state institutions alike attempted to shame society into participating in commemoration by drawing on these ideas. The Veterans’ Organisation of Novosibirsk, for example, suggested that citizens ought to “prepare to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Victory with dignity, as a national holiday; show your recognition and respect for the older generation [ . . . ] take your fate into your own hands”.<sup>26</sup>

Veteran-youth collaboration had been important in the early 1990s. *Glasnost* enabled the emergence of revisionist historical accounts, threatening to deconstruct the myth of the Great Patriotic War. Veterans organisations and officials were particularly irked at ideas that new historians were “blackening the history of the Great Patriotic War”, and ousting a “patriotic and military education from educational institutions”.<sup>27</sup> One Novosibirsk-based organisation announced that, “we are aware that not everything was smooth in our history. However, this story cannot be blackened and crossed out. As you know, people who lose respect for their past have no future.”<sup>28</sup> These fears led to the creation of new initiatives targeting youth.

Calls to revive military-patriotic education were particularly strong (Edwards 2022). A speaker at a meeting for the Heroes of the Soviet Union claimed: “In modern conditions, the importance of a military-patriotic education of youth is growing. Everyone sees our duty in doing this [ . . . ] to pass on our life

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25 “Obrashcheniya po sluchayu Dnya pamyati i skorbi k zhitelyam gorodov-geroev i gorodov RF, nakhodivshihya na vremennno okkupirovannoy fashistskoy Germaniyei territorii.” F. 6. Op. 1. d. 129, Yeltsin Center, 21 June 1996, <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/12420> (13 May 2021).

26 F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l. 29–30, GARF, 1993–1995.

27 F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l. 37, GARF, 1995; F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l. 28, GARF, 1995.

28 F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, l. 29–30, GARF, 1993–1995.

experience to them. Youth [should be] proud of their Fatherland, [and] if necessary, be ready to protect the material and spiritual values of their homeland.”<sup>29</sup> Funding and concrete support followed these declarations. In 1996, a Presidential decree diverted funds to a federal programme aimed at developing “the citizenship and patriotism of Russian youth, [and] support for military-patriotic youth and children’s associations”.<sup>30</sup> The Ministry of Defence used the decree to “strengthen and expand ties” between the military with educational institutions, and to launch groups which could tackle educational issues and training the youth for military service. The anniversary was therefore also used as an instrument in reviewing textbook narratives and increasing material resources for the fostering of a military-patriotic youth education.

A patriotic education was not only integral to the glorification of Russia’s history but also in developing young people’s desire to join the military. Defeat in Afghanistan, the ongoing war in Chechnya, and increasing accounts of “dedovshchina” tainted the prestige of the military (Eichler 2012, 63). Nikolai Golovin’s classroom textbook *My First History of Russia: Tales for Children (Moya pervaya russkaya istoriya v rasskazakh dlya detey, 1992)* was expressly written to inculcate “love of the homeland and self-sacrifice” (Golovin 1992, foreword). Other societal sectors followed suit. Parliamentary hearings on the social protection of military personnel in June 1994 culminated in an announcement that “the committee believes that it is necessary to take the initiative [ . . . ] for the improvement of the prestige of military service. It should revive the military-patriotic spirit of Russians as a nation, in a personal sense of the word.”<sup>31</sup> The children’s author Aleksandra Ishimova, who penned another textbook of “tales” for children as early as 1841, wrote about poor living conditions in the military, but stated that such a sacrifice was necessary because “Dear little readers [ . . . ] [at some point you will endure this] because you will eventually

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29 F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 1003, 1. 37, GARF, 1995.

30 “Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 16 maya 1996 g. N 727 ‘O merakh gosudarstvennoy podderzhki obshchestvennykh ob’yedineniy, vedushchikh rabotu po voyenno-patrioticheskomu vospitaniyu molodezhi.’” Elektronnyy fond pravovykh i normativno-tekhnicheskikh dokumentov, <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/9019915> (13 May 2021); “Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 16 maya 1996 goda, no 727. O merakh gosudarstvennoy podderzhki obshchestvennykh ob’yedineniy vedushchikh rabotu po voenno-patrioticheskomu vospitaniyu molodezhi.” Ukazy Prezidenta Rossii 1991–1999, Yeltsin Center, 16 May 1996, <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/act/37014> (13 May 2021).

31 “Dokumenty po podgotovke i provedeniyu parlamentskikh slyzhanii ‘sotsial’naya zashchita voennosluzhashchikh lits, uvolennykh s voennoy sluzhby, i chlenov ikh semey, zhil’e dlya armii, sostoyane, problem, puti resheniya’ (proekty rekomendatsii, spravki, informatsii).” F. 10100, Op. 2, d. 1126, 1. 17–24, GARF, Moscow, 7 June 1994.

protect the motherland”<sup>32</sup> (Ishimova 1996, 19). She wrote, “you will be pleased to learn of the glorious deeds of your ancestors” – suggesting that the interest of youth in the country’s past is a necessity (Ishimova 1996, 8). Golovin (1992) claimed, “It is known that children are interested in stories about heroes and exploits.” Since commemorative memory is based on a model handed down by previous generations and interpreted and imagined by the current generations, it was important that stories of victory, military glory and veteran heroism remained a central part of the imagined memory that youth would in turn inculcate (Lavoie 2002, 304; Feindt et al. 2014, 26–27).

State officials, veteran groups and textbook authors targeted Russia’s youth with messages of their perpetual debt to the veterans’ sacrifice and expectations that the youth should preserve this victory in both commemorative terms and in their duty to defend Russia. They were invited to participate in physical labour-type activities, while being told how they should feel about their nation’s history. These messages, which were replicated across numerous Russian societal domains, ensured Russia’s youth remained exposed to militaristic-patriotic world-views – and contributed to tackling the nation’s military recruitment issues.

### 3 Conclusion: Perpetuating memory and the persistence of militarisation

Rituals revived and developed in the Yeltsin era contributed to the Great Patriotic War’s mythical status in the 2020s. The yearly revival of the anniversary event mythologised the Great Patriotic War as it forced an obligation for continued memorialisation onto newer generations, who, as the years go by, are distanced ever further from direct recollections of the war itself.

In the early 1990s, war in Chechnya and NATO expansionism raised concerns over the state of Russia’s security. In response, the commemorative event was also used as a call to current and future generations to continue the victory of their ancestors and reemphasise the sacred role of the military in society. Indeed, reminders of Russia’s historical vulnerability to invasion and war-induced hardships had always been useful in justifying the need for a strong military (Brown 1994, 863; Boje, Fedor and Rowland 1982, 18). Yeltsin demonstrated this

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<sup>32</sup> Aleksandra Ishimova’s book has been republished numerous times in the Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet period. It has remained an important text of reference beyond the breaks of regime and for the understanding of Russia’s historical past.

phenomenon in his Victory Day speech on Red Square in 1995 by highlighting Russia's military history: "[Russia] stands and will stand [. . .] [as] centuries they have risen from ruins".<sup>33</sup> This rhetoric served as a reminder of the historical challenges Russia faced and overcame. As noted in a parliamentary hearing on the topic of social needs of military personnel, "We can for good reason state that the Russian army still guarantees our society's stability and safety today."<sup>34</sup> By acknowledging the military's past as a guarantor of stability and security, Yeltsin was amplifying the army's importance in the present.

The mythologisation of the Great Patriotic War, facilitated through the never-ending burden of debt placed on younger generations, aided the persistent militarisation of Russia's society. Each annual festivity enabled the repetition and intensification of narratives of glory, loyalty and indebtedness. In contemporary Russia, participants in the annual Immortal Regiment ("Bessmertnyy polk") parades carry images of their loved ones as they march towards Red Square on Victory Day.<sup>35</sup> Despite the huge death toll of the war, political and state organisations under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin revived and cultivated a set of cultural-militaristic rituals that found a place for the "chosen glory" of the Great Patriotic War in post-Soviet Russian identity.

Young people were militarised in their role as organisers of future commemorative activities, and in the imagining of their own role in the protection of the motherland. Calls to "protect" and "love the motherland" demonstrated the use of memory in the continued militarisation of society. Russia was not alone in underlining this link. In America at the same time, Bill Clinton's "support the troops" narrative emphasised current and future generations' obligation to commemorate the victory in a similar way (Danilova 2016, 208–218). For Russia, the Great Patriotic War, as opposed to Clinton's speech, which was about the present, reconciled various generations. Yeltsin's actions were about the past (and about appealing to the older generations) as much as the present. He praised the veteran's historic role, while warning the youth not to "dull the memory" of the war victors. He stated that "no one has to be forgotten and nothing should be forgotten".<sup>36</sup>

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33 F. 21 Op. 1, d. 128, Yeltsin Center, 5 May 1995.

34 GARF, f. 10100, Op. 2 d. 1126, 6–7.

35 The Immortal Regiment was established in 2012 in Tomsk. Participants parade images of those who fought on both the battlefield and home front in the Great Patriotic War on placards. Those without a family member in the Great Patriotic War are encouraged to pick an image of any veteran and march with their memory in mind.

36 F. 21 Op. 1, d. 128, Yeltsin Center, 5 May 1995; F. 10100, Op. 1, d. 135, GARF, 1995.

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