Anyone can be a hero: the militarization of children in Putin's Russia

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Knowledge of the past and its famous heroes has become especially topical in recent decades, when there are those who are literally attempting to rewrite world history, questioning even the fact that it was the Soviet Union that definitively smashed fascism in the Second World War. The [film's] creators managed to find a complex balance between authenticity and imagination by using real historical events. And most importantly, the film vividly and expressively shows that anyone can be a hero.[1]

In 2022 a new animated feature film entitled *Suvorov: the great journey* premiered in Russia. Voiced by well-known actors, made with financial support from the Russian state[2] and aimed at family audiences, the film tells the story of Grisha, a fictional 16-year-old boy whose heroic action saves the life of General Alexander Suvorov, one of Russia's most famous historical figures. The 'journey' in the film's title refers not only to the general's famous crossing of the Alps in 1799 but also, and perhaps primarily, to Grisha's personal journey of maturity from a boy into a man, and from ordinary to extraordinary.

For more than a decade, the Russian state has been engaged in militarization, including investing heavily in its armed forces and defence industry.[3] The emphasis on building up its war-waging capacity has only intensified since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022,[4] with the international community, especially the West, watching these developments closely and debating whether Russia's growing military capability signals its intentions to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy, even beyond its war in Ukraine. But there are many ways of preparing for war, and the societal dimension of militarization is arguably just as

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1 Irina Pavlyutkina, 'Geroem mozhet stat' kazhdiy' [Anyone can be a hero], *Krasnaya zvezda*, 29 April 2022. (All translations are the work of the authors.)

2 The Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Culture are listed among the film's backers. See Susanna Alperina, '"Suvorov velikoe puteshesvie" pyat voprosov o novom multfilme' ['Suvorov: the great journey': five questions about the new cartoon], *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 4 May 2022, https://rg.ru/2022/05/04/suvorov-velikoe-puteshestvie-piat-voprosov-o-novom-multfilme.html, accessed on 5 April 2024. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all other URLs cited in this article were accessible on 23 Dec. 2024.)

3 Bettina Renz, *Russia's military revival* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018).

4 Andrew Roth, '"A lot higher than we expected": Russian arms production worries Europe's war planners', *Guardian*, 15 Feb. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/15/rate-of-russian-military-production-worries-european-war-planners.

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important as its material counterpart. The Russian state's efforts to influence its citizens' attitudes have kept pace with its military buildup, with the gradual tightening of control over information[5] shifting more recently to the ruthless elimination of challenges to the 'special military operation' in Ukraine.[6] The state's focus on shaping the views of society extends to its youth: lessons in patriotism have been added to the school curriculum[7] and textbooks are being rewritten to present interpretations of history that justify Russian foreign policy.[8] But the scale and scope of Russia's attempts to influence the next generation of its citizens go well beyond what happens in schools and indicate that the state foresees a continuing need for a war-supportive society.

We argue that the Russian state uses the concept of heroism in its efforts to militarize Russia's children: heroism and the prospect of becoming heroes are used to entice young people to embrace war glorification and provide unconditional support to Russia's army. War-related heroic behaviours, particularly seen through the past actions of war veterans, are presented as both admirable and attainable ideals for youth that can be developed by participating in interactive and emotion-filled activities. The emphasis on youth participation reveals the significance of practice, and especially the roles that embodiment and emotion play in these practices, as crucial mechanisms of everyday militarization. We focus on the everyday 'hero-making' activities of two patriotic youth groups with close links to the Kremlin, Youth Army and Victory Volunteers, during the first 100 days following the invasion. We use content analysis and critical discourse analysis to assess the groups' descriptions of these activities, which include war re-enactments, meeting veterans, and providing emotional and practical support to Ukrainian children displaced (or abducted) because of the war. We identify dominant, militarizing discourses that reveal the centrality of the embodied and immersive nature of these activities, and especially the forging of emotional bonds between young people and those who have experienced war, to the militarizing efforts of Youth Army and Victory Volunteers and to those of the Russian state itself. By giving young people opportunities to experience a facsimile of war, these youth groups aim to make the process of identifying with war fun and compelling to encourage children to grow up admiring the armed forces, embracing military values, and trusting the army to protect Russia from what the state deems is a hostile world.

This article makes both empirical and conceptual contributions. First, our in-depth analysis of the activities of two leading Russian patriotic youth groups enriches our understanding of the scope, nature and functioning of militarizing processes aimed at young people in contemporary Russia. Second, we contribute

[5] On this point, see Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson, *Putin v. the people: the perilous politics of a divided Russia* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

[6] Dasha Litvinova, 'How Putin's crackdown on dissent became the hallmark of the Russian leader's 24 years in power', *Los Angeles Times*, 9 March 2024, https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-03-09/how-putins-crackdown-on-dissent-became-the-hallmark-of-the-russian-leaders-24-years-in-power.

[7] Alla Hurska, 'Generation Z: Russia's militarization of children', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 20: 134, 2023, https://jamestown.org/program/generation-z-russias-militarization-of-children.

[8] Katia Patin, 'The Kremlin revises a textbook to dictate future understanding of Russian history', *Coda*, 14 Aug. 2023, https://www.codastory.com/rewriting-history/kremlin-texbook-ukraine.

to the understanding of everyday militarization as an embodied, emotion-filled process. We argue that Victory Volunteers and Youth Army's efforts to foster personal relationships between youth and war veterans, involving the veterans' articulation of complex emotions about war that they invite youth to share, represents a deeper and more meaningful engagement with militarization that aims to go beyond superficial entertainment. Finally, by focusing on militarizing efforts aimed at youth, the article demonstrates that state-supported institutions in Russia—and by extension the state itself—are making considerable efforts to ensure that the next generation of Russian citizens will regard war as a necessary means of resolving international disputes as well as a normal part of life. Our analysis therefore addresses an issue of great concern to both scholars and policy-makers: what kind of Russia will emerge after Vladimir Putin? We conclude by considering some wider implications of a militarized Russian youth for Russia's ability to command broad societal support for a more aggressive foreign policy in the future.

The article begins by explaining our methodology, including introducing the two patriotic youth groups that are central to our research and identifying key discourses that are constructed, reinforced and disseminated through participatory activities and the officially sanctioned texts that describe them. We then discuss the major concepts that we use in our analysis: everyday militarization, heroism and embodiment. Our analysis of the hero-making activities of Youth Army and Victory Volunteers follows, emphasizing the importance that the groups place on war veterans as role models for young people and on giving youth the opportunity to hear veterans' personal stories, engage in typical wartime practices and share some of the emotions that the experience of war evokes. The article concludes by reflecting on some of the implications of successful youth militarization for the future of Russian society, for Russian foreign policy and for international security.

Methodology

Our research focuses on Russian patriotic youth groups and the role that they play in facilitating state-led efforts to engage Russia's youth in everyday militarizing practices outside formal education, especially in activities that young people participate in during their leisure time.[9] We chose Youth Army and Victory Volunteers because they are among the largest, most prominent and fast-growing youth groups in Russia. Their extensive links to the state and its patriotic education initiatives means that the messages they convey to young people are consistent with the state's. Both groups not only organize activities for their own members but regard outreach to wider society, and especially to other young people, as a crucial part of their purpose. By studying these two groups, we can analyse a

[9] We recognize that some young people may be subjected to pressure from parents or teachers or peers to join these groups or participate in the activities they organize, but involvement in these groups is not formally required in the same way as school attendance.

substantial proportion of the patriotic youth activity in Russia designed to make the prospects of war and military service attractive to young people.

Defence minister Sergey Shoigu established Youth Army in 2016 as part of the 2016–2020 project 'Patriotic education of Russian citizens'. It resembles Soviet-era patriotic military groups such as the Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Air Force and Navy (DOSAAF).[10] As of February 2025 Youth Army had 1.7 million members and 89 regional headquarters.[11] The group focuses on developing the values and capabilities of young people in four areas: spiritual and moral; social; physical; and intellectual.[12] It is just one of a number of patriotic education initiatives embarked on by the Russian state since 2001 to foster social cohesion and cultivate a distinct Russian national identity.[13] Like DOSAAF, Youth Army emphasizes preparing youth for military service.[14] It also resembles a real army; members wear uniforms consisting of beige trousers and a red shirt, a red beret and military-style boots.[15]

While Youth Army has received considerable attention both in the international media[16] and in academic research,[17] Victory Volunteers have been largely overlooked. Their origins lie in an organization set up to coordinate commemorative activities during the 70th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War (the name given to the Soviet involvement in the Second World War).[18] The success of the initiative, which united '136,000 caring people',[19] inspired United Russia State Duma deputy Olga Zanko to create the Victory Volunteers in 2015 with

[10] President of the Russian Federation, 'Zasedanie Rossiiskogo orgkomiteta "Pobeda"' [Meeting of the Russian organizing committee 'Victory'], 5 April 2016, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51641; Andrey Koshkin, Egor Moroz, Aleksandr Yankilevich and Daria Andreeva, 'Russian experience of patriotic education: generalisation tendencies of the consensus around militarism', Proceedings of the VIII International Scientific and Practical Conference 'Current problems of social and labour relations', *Advances in social science, education and humanities research*, vol. 527, 2020, p. 39, https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210322.145; 1; Martin Kerntopf, 'Russia's contemporary hegemonic turn and change in collective memory', paper presented at the conference 'The collapse of memory—memory of collapse', Lund, 2016, p. 4, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309429456_Russia's_Contemporary_Hegemonic_Turn_and_Change_in_Collective_Memory; Youth Army, 'O dvizhenii "Yunarmiya"' [About the movement 'Youth Army'], https://yunarmy.ru/history.

[11] Youth Army, 'About the movement "Youth Army"'.

[12] Youth Army, 'About the movement "Youth Army"'.

[13] Koshkin et al., 'Russian experience of patriotic education', pp. 390–1.

[14] Faith Goldsmith, *Yunarmiya: a new wave of Russian nationalism*, Masters thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2020, pp. 42–3.

[15] 'Yunarmeitsy podolska stali luchshimi na regionalnom etape voenno-sportivnoi igry "Pobeda"' [Members of the Youth Army of Podolsk became the best at the regional stage of the military-sporting game 'Victory'], Youth Army website, 6 June 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220607000207/https:/yunarmy.ru/press-center/news/yunarmeytsy-podolska-stali-luchshimi-na-regionalnom-etape-voenno-sportivnoy-igry-pobeda.

[16] See, for example, Kiril Avramov, 'Yunarmia: meet the young Russian "guardians of order"', *GlobePost*, 5 Feb. 2021, https://theglobepost.com/2019/02/05/yunarmia-russia-youth-army; Anton Troianovski, Ivan Nechepurenko and Valerie Hopkins, 'How the Kremlin is militarizing Russian society', *New York Times*, 21 Dec. 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/world/europe/russia-military-putin-kremlin.html.

[17] Notably Ian Garner, *Z generation: into the heart of Russia's fascist youth* (London: Hurst, 2023), but see also: Håvard Bækken, 'Guns and glory: a dualistic perspective on resurgent militarism in Russia', in Sandis Sraders and George Spencer Terry, eds, *A restless embrace of the past?* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2022); Koshkin et al., 'Russian experience of patriotic education', pp. 390–3; Elizaveta Gaufman, 'The militainment of World War II memory in post-Soviet Russia', in Paul Srodecki and Daria Kozlova, eds, *War and remembrance: World War II and the Holocaust in the memory politics of post-socialist Europe* (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2023).

[18] The 2015 All-Russian Volunteer Corps of the 70th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, 1941–1945.

[19] Victory Volunteers, 'O dvizhenii' [About the movement], Victory Volunteers, https://xn--90abhd2amfb-bjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/about.

the goal of ensuring that children continue to preserve the memory of the Great Patriotic War. With 650,000 members in 89 regional branches,[20] Victory Volunteers conduct a range of activities to support veterans. Victory Volunteers describe themselves on the Russian social media site VKontakte as a 'community of caring people'[21] and enjoy a positive reputation in Russian society.[22] The movement's emphasis on philanthropy gives them a distinctly different image compared to the Youth Army, which is echoed in their appearance. While Victory Volunteers do wear a uniform of a sort—t-shirts or sweatshirts in the signature pale blue with the group's logo (a white dove on a blue background with a St George's ribbon)—it is not obviously militaristic in appearance. Their stated aim, however, is to increase the prestige of the Russian military in society by keeping alive the memory of the victories of their ancestors.[23] And the most significant of these ancestral victories is that of the Great Patriotic War. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the state has relied even more heavily than before on the memory of this war, which continues to enjoy a high level of social acceptability.[24] Great Patriotic War heroism helps ground the Russian state's key narratives, both about a 'renewed' battle against fascism but also about the collective efforts of ordinary citizens in the 1940s and, by extension, the need for Russians to emulate their actions.[25] Both groups draw extensively on these state-promoted ideas of the heroism of ordinary people during the war.

The data analysed for this project consists of more than 400 press releases published on Youth Army and Victory Volunteers websites during the first 100 days of the mass invasion of Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022. We read all material in Russian and translated the passages quoted in this article. We initially conducted content analysis (CA) to confirm the impressions formed by our initial reading of this material about the prevalence of discussions of heroism, embodiment and emotion, and the significance of veterans in the groups' activities. CA identified the presence and frequency of key terms (e.g., hero, heroism, veteran, emotions and feelings) as well as references to militarizing practices. The word 'hero' and its variations are used extensively, appearing 244 times in the data collected from the Victory Volunteers website alone. We then used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to inform our reading of the material. We chose CDA because of its emphasis on contextual understanding and discursive interactions. This includes identifying both creators and audiences and the power relations between them, as well as examining the purpose of the messages in the texts, such

[20] Victory Volunteers, 'About the movement'.

[21] Victory Volunteers, via VKontakte, 'Additional information', https://vk.com/vsezapobedu?w=club81675082.

[22] See, for example, the comments of an anonymous reviewer on the Russian website Yandex.ru that the organization is 'a good house of like-minded people who, no matter what, are ready to help anytime and anywhere': 'Vserossiiskoe obshchestvennoe dvizhenie volontery pobedy' [The all-Russian public movement Volunteers of Victory], Yandex.ru, https://yandex.ru/maps/org/vserossiyskoye_obshchestvennoye_dvizheniye_volontery_pobedy/136797497227/reviews/?ll=37.644756%2C55.768249&z=17.

[23] 'Dokumenty' [Documents], Victory Volunteers, 2021, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/docs.

[24] Olga Malinova, 'Political uses of the Great Patriotic War in post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin', in Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, eds, *War and memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[25] Jade McGlynn, *Memory makers: the politics of the past in Putin's Russia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 116–19.

as the reproduction of values or ideologies.[26] CDA scholars primarily examine news texts, as they can reach a mass audience, act as a mouthpiece for particular societal groups and help to sell specific stories.[27] Press releases adhere to the same strategies and principles as news stories: they have particular 'news values', whereby the authors prioritize certain activities, topics, turns of phrase and people. These news values become embedded in language, as the language used can change the overall purpose of the story being told to that defined audience.[28]

As organizations that were either created (Youth Army) or are sponsored (Victory Volunteers) by the state, the groups' press releases perpetuate pro-Kremlin narratives, values and ideologies. Our analysis recognizes that the statements and emotional responses attributed to the young people in these texts may be heavily edited or even completely invented to make the officially sanctioned messages more persuasive to target audiences. But while these press releases do not provide an accurate measure of the effectiveness of youth militarization, they are valuable because they identify the responses that the groups' adult organizers want to evoke, along with aspects of the militarizing practices that they emphasize. Our interpretation of these texts as reflecting the intentions of youth groups and the Russian state is consistent with the emphasis in CDA on meaning-making through discursive representations.[29] We understand 'discourse' as 'socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality'[30] that not only reflect but also shape and enable social reality.[31] We regard 'discourse' as extending beyond the written or spoken word to include signs, symbols, ceremonial practices and activities,[32] enabling us to consider extracurricular activities that normalize certain ideologies within everyday experiences as a mode of communication used to engage Russia's youth with state-sanctioned narratives. CDA works particularly well in this project because the press releases and activities perpetuate state-driven discourses on Russia patriotism, historical memory and military glory. Our analysis has identified three domi-

[26] Norman Fairclough, 'Critical discourse analysis', in Michael Handford and James Paul Gee, eds, *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 9; Teun A. van Dijik, *Racism and the press* (London: Routledge, 1991); Renugah Ramanatham and Tan Bee Hoon, 'Application of critical discourse analysis in media discourse studies', *The Southeast Journal of English Language Studies* 21: 2, 2015, pp. 57–68; Deti Anitasari, 'Critical discourse analysis: mass media', *INA-Rxiv*, publ. online 13 Jan. 2018, https://doi.org/10.31227/osf.io/a23y6.

[27] Ruth Wodak, 'The discourse-historical approach', in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds, *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (London: SAGE, 2001), p. 66; Damien Okado-Gough, 'Critical discourse analysis: current approaches and the advent of multimodality', *Mulberry*, no. 67, 2017, p. 52; Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, 'Why do news values matter? Towards a methodological framework for analysing news discourse in critical discourse analysis and beyond', *Discourse and Society* 25: 2, 2014, pp. 135–58 at p. 136, https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926513516041.

[28] Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, *News discourse* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); Bednarek and Caple, 'Why do news values matter?'.

[29] Ana Caballero-Mengibar, 'Critical discourse analysis in the study of representation, identity politics and power relations: a multi-method approach', *Communication and Society* 28: 2, 2015, pp. 39–54 at p. 41, https://doi.org/10.15581/003.28.35957.

[30] Theo van Leeuwen, 'Discourse as the recontextualization of social practice: a guide', in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds, *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, 2nd edn (London: SAGE, 2009), p. 144.

[31] Siegfried Jäger and Florentine Maier, 'Theoretical and methodological aspects of Foucauldian critical discourse analysis and dispositive analysis', in Wodak and Meyer, eds, *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, 2nd edn, p. 36.

[32] For a major study on contemporary Russia that uses both texts and practices as the basis for analysis, see Elizaveta Gaufman, *Everyday foreign policy: performing and consuming the Russian nation after Crimea* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023).

nant, militarizing discourses defining the state's expectations for young people and shaping their experience of participation in Youth Army and Victory Volunteers activities. These are as follows: 1) war is a normal part of life for Russians; 2) the war veteran is the role model of a 'good Russian'; and 3) anyone can be a hero by participating in war-supportive activities. These press releases are both news text and digital discourse: they act as an information hub for the groups' activities while fitting into contemporary and popular means of information-sharing.

Everyday militarization: preparing Russia's young people for future war

Militarization is described as the practice of preparing a state and society for war, both through material means and as a discursive process that encourages change in attitudes towards the state's use of force.[33] This article focuses on the latter: on 'the process of preparing for the *idea* of war'.[34] We draw on insights from feminist and other critical IR scholars who conceptualize militarization as a step-by-step process promoting the superiority of military over civilian values and the acceptance of the military as the logical institution to solve a wide variety of political and personal problems.[35] The way in which these scholars locate militarizing processes in the power practices that uphold certain discourses and representations promoting the military (and a reliance on it)[36] influenced our decision to use CDA to interpret the press releases posted by the two youth groups. The emphasis by critical scholars on the militarizing power of the everyday highlights the importance of focusing on ordinary experiences and practices, and not just extraordinary and spectacular moments.[37] Indeed, as we discuss, Youth Army and Victory Volunteers weave war and military service into everyday life, whether through the activities they organize for young people or the way they frame veterans' experiences. Spectacular moments of danger, excitement and heroism take their place beside the mundane and ordinary, reinforcing two of the dominant militarizing discourses that we identify: war is a normal part of Russian life; and anyone can be a hero by participating in or supporting war.

While those who study militarization in western democratic societies emphasize that this practice is often subtle,[38] Russian militarization processes are far more

[33] Catherine Lutz, 'Making war at home in the United States: militarisation and the current crisis', *American Anthropologist* 104: 3, 2002, pp. 723–35, https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.723.

[34] Linda Åhäll, 'The dance of militarisation: a feminist security studies take on "the political"', *Critical Studies on Security* 4: 2, 2016, pp. 154–68 at p. 160, https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2016.1153933 (emphasis in original).

[35] See, for example, Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: the international politics of militarizing women's lives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 3; Michael Geyer, 'The militarization of Europe 1914–1945', in John R. Gillis, ed., *The militarization of the western world* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 65–102; Henry A. Giroux, 'War on terror: the militarising of public space and culture in the United States', *Third Text* 18: 4, 2004, pp. 211–21 at pp. 215–16.

[36] Linda Åhäll, 'Feeling everyday IR: embodied, affective, militarising movement as choreography of war', *Cooperation and Conflict* 54: 2, 2019, pp. 149–66 at p. 159.

[37] See, for example, Richelle M. Bernazzoli and Colin Flint, 'Embodying the garrison state? Everyday geographies of militarization in American society', *Political Geography* 29: 3, 2010, pp. 157–66, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2010.02.014; and Lorraine Dowler, 'Gender, militarization and sovereignty', *Geography Compass* 6: 8, 2012, pp. 490–9, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2012.00509.x.

[38] Åhäll, 'Feeling everyday IR', pp. 151–2.

blatant and explicitly state-led, or conducted by individuals and organizations enjoying state support. Even before February 2022, the military featured extensively in Russians' everyday life: in extravagant commemorative activities dedicated to past wars, but also in prevalent narratives that depict a large and powerful army as the solution to perceived Russian vulnerability in a hostile world. The state's tight control over the country's memory landscape that upholds this world-view means that Russia's youth are exposed to it through a broad environment encompassing a militarized popular culture and extracurricular activities designed for children, as well as in school.

'Militainment' is an important conceptual lens for understanding militarization as a process of preparing society to accept the idea of war and to adopt military values. Roger Stahl conceptualized militainment as comprising immersive forms of entertainment that offer civilians a 'realistic' but safe experience of war and thus shift the audience from being a spectator of war to a virtual participant.[39] Video gaming is an example of militainment. In the United States there is considerable crossover between the civilian gaming industry and the military, with civilians playing games about war (some using technology developed by the military) while soldiers' training incorporates game-like simulations.[40] Footage released to news outlets and through social media depicting the impact of bombs, missiles and drones in real life wars often resembles war games played by civilians, contributing to a blurring of the boundaries between war and play, while keeping viewers at an emotionally safe distance from the human consequences of war.[41]

Some militarization processes in Putin's Russia have been analysed through the lens of militainment, notably by Elizaveta Gaufman, who argues that one of Russia's formative historical memories—the Great Patriotic War—is being repackaged as entertainment for consumption, superficial enjoyment and state glorification rather than true commemoration that encourages engagement with more difficult emotions such as trauma and loss.[42] There are interactive experiences to suit all age groups, including dressing young children in replicas of wartime uniforms, online gaming for teenagers and adults, and even 'Patriot Park': a family-friendly theme park created by the defence ministry that includes a replica partisan village.[43] Youth Army and Victory Volunteers create enjoyable and entertaining experiences that aim to get youth to accept military service—and, indeed, war itself—as a normal part of life. However, we argue that militainment is simply that: a step in a militarizing process. We argue that the Russian state, working with and through patriotic youth groups, attempts to go beyond superficial and momentary enter-

[39] Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc: war, media, and popular culture* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 16.
[40] J. C. Herz, *Joystick nation: how videogames ate our quarters, won our hearts, and rewired our minds* (London: Abacus, 1997), pp. 204–5.
[41] Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr, 'Virtuous war: simulation and the militarization of play', in Kenneth J. Saltman and David A. Gabbard, eds, *Education as enforcement: the militarization and corporatization of schools* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 280, 282.
[42] Gaufman, 'The militainment of World War II memory'.
[43] Gaufman, 'The militainment of World War II memory', pp. 70–7. See also Olga Konkka, '"Russia my history": a hi-tech version of an old history textbook', *Journal of Educational Media, Memory and Society* 13: 1, 2021, pp. 34–9, 44.

tainment. By glorifying everyday heroism, seeking to evoke powerful emotions experienced during wartime and promoting immersive activities, these groups aim to make a deep impression on the youthful participants to shape their values and attitudes towards war. As Linda Åhäll demonstrates in her discussion of the 'ghost soldiers'—young men dressed as First World War soldiers brought into everyday settings in Britain—the disruption of civilian life 'affectively through notions of sacrifice, possibly heroism, misery, but also gratefulness'[44] can create lasting impressions by normalizing war in the everyday. Russian patriotic youth groups employ these concepts and emotions to serve the state's long-term objective of using history to promote patriotism in society.[45] Awareness of Russia's history of war and participation in war-supportive activities is an expectation of every patriotic Russian citizen and populates the everyday lives of Russian youth. Patriotic youth groups ensure that the state's militarizing messages are neither confined to the classroom nor to exceptional, one-off experiences such as the 'ghost soldiers', but instead continue to reach children on a regular, frequent basis through their extracurricular activities.

Heroism

Ideas about heroes and heroism are central to the Russian state's efforts to militarize children. Films such as *Suvorov: the great journey*, as well as school lessons and activities organized by patriotic youth groups, seek to inspire children to perpetuate heroic 'values' of military valour, patriotism and sacrifice. These efforts have become more urgent since Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.[46] While glorifying well-known figures from Russia's history such as Suvorov, 'ordinary heroism' is an established theme in the state's public discourses aimed at young people to influence future generations of Russian society.[47]

Scholars have devoted considerable effort to identifying the characteristics and actions that can transform ordinary people into heroes.[48] However, heroes are constructed not only by their characters and actions, but by others endowing

[44] Åhäll, 'Feeling everyday IR', p. 161.

[45] Marlene Laruelle, 'Patriotic youth clubs in Russia: professional niches, cultural capital and narratives of social engagement', *Europe-Asia Studies* 67: 1, 2015, pp. 8–27 at p. 12, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2014.986965; Håvard Bækken, 'Patriotic disunity: limits to popular support for militaristic policy in Russia', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37: 3, 2021, pp. 261–75 at pp. 264–5, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2021.1905417; Marlène Laruelle, 'Negotiating history: memory wars in the near abroad and pro-Kremlin youth movements', *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 19: 3, 2011, pp. 233–52 at p. 243, https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/19_3_J5116W543760143L.pdf.

[46] 'The war of patriotism', *RE:Russia*, 4 July 2023, https://re-russia.net/en/review/321; see also: Håvard Baekken, 'Merging the Great Patriotic War and Russian warfare in Ukraine: a case study of Russian military patriotic clubs in 2022', *Political Research Exchange* 5: 1, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2023.2265135.

[47] Jade McGlynn, 'Living forms of patriotism: engaging young Russians in military history?', in Félix Krawatzek and Nina Friess, eds, *Youth and memory in Europe: defining the past, shaping the future* (Berlin and Boston, MA: DeGruyter, 2022).

[48] See, for example, Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals, *Heroes: what they do and why we need them* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Ari Kohen, *Untangling heroism: classical philosophy and the concept of the hero* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014); Sibylle Scheipers, 'Introduction: toward post-heroic warfare?', in Sibylle Scheipers, ed., *Heroism and the changing character of war: towards post-heroic warfare?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

them with 'imputed meaning and symbolic significance—that not only raises them above others in public esteem but makes them the object of some kind of collective emotional investment'.[49] Heroes only resonate with their communities when the hero demonstrates values that the community holds dear.[50] In Russia, these values are said to include self-sacrifice, along with courage and state loyalty.[51] By representing a society's core values, especially in times of crisis, heroes can inspire individuals to act similarly or to progress towards a higher purpose. The Russian state establishes such benchmarks by positioning yesterday's heroes as role models for today's young people and identifying direct connections between past heroes and future generations.[52] These connections are elaborated in the rhetoric of Russia's patriotic youth groups: Youth Army members are described as following 'the high heroic traditions of their peers of all generations'.[53]

Heroism is not only considered a natural capability of the ordinary person, but as a set of behaviours that can be taught and practised.[54] While the film *Suvorov: the great journey* aims to raise the awareness among Russia's youth of their history, the emphasis on the transformation of an ordinary teenager into a hero is consistent with state-funded educational plans to develop future Grishas. These plans are pursued by establishing core state-sanctioned values, such as courage, selflessness, and bravery, and then by providing a platform for role models who embody these values, especially Great Patriotic War veterans. Finally, the material is presented in 'interesting formats' to engage youthful audiences and transfer these heroic ideals into the psyche of Russia's young people. We argue that these interactive and immersive initiatives reinforce state-approved messages about the importance of war by providing Russia's youth with opportunities to act out heroic values and feel emotions connected to wartime experiences. They enable young people to take concrete steps towards demonstrating that they, too, can be heroes.

Embodiment

If heroism provides Russia's young people with role models to emulate, then embodiment allows them to share in some of the heroes' experiences and emotions. Our understanding of embodiment is informed by critical IR scholars who centre experience, emotion and the human dimension in research about war.[55] By asking

[49] Geoffrey Cubitt and Allen Warren, *Heroic reputations and exemplary lives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 3.

[50] Veronica Kitchen, 'Heroism and the construction of political community', in Veronica Kitchen and Jennifer G. Mathers, eds, *Heroism and global politics* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 21.

[51] Laruelle, 'Negotiating history'; Laruelle, 'Patriotic youth clubs in Russia'.

[52] Bækken, 'Patriotic disunity', p. 263.

[53] 'Yunarmeytsy prinyali uchastie v prazdnovanii stoletiya pionerskoy organizatsii' [Youth Army members took part in the celebration of the centenary of the pioneer organization], Youth Army website, 20 May 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20240424082621/https:/yunarmy.ru/press-center/news/yunarmeytsy-prinyali-uchastie-v-prazdnovanii-stoletiya-pionerskoy-organizatsii.

[54] Zeno Franco and Philip Zimbardo, 'The banality of heroism', *Greater Good*, 1 Sept. 2006, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_banality_of_heroism; Eranda Jayawickreme and Paul Di Stefano, 'How can we study heroism? Integrating persons, situations and communities', *Political Psychology* 33: 1, 2012, pp. 165–78, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2011.00861.x.

[55] See, for example, Christine Sylvester, *War as experience: contributions from International Relations and feminist analysis*

questions about how bodies experience war, this work provides an important corrective to the tendency to view war as abstract and theoretical, or to focus exclusively on policy decisions. To understand the significance of embodiment for developing sympathy for war and militaries, we draw on the academic literature on embodiment and militarization, which argues that war readiness in civilian society can be achieved through 'affective, sensory and embodied practices, regimes and experiences',[56] including emotionally intense, immersive video war gaming, where 'the civilian becomes virtual soldier—at least momentarily'[57] as well as 'helmetcam' recordings that expose the viewer to the soldier's point of view in war.[58] Another example of the embodied war experience is the notion of being a 'flesh witness' to war, inspired by a French First World War soldier's claim to have gained a unique understanding of war through personal experience—literally 'with his flesh'.[59] This concept is based on the idea that ordinary soldiers have special insights and understandings of war through direct, personal and sensory experience—the experience of their bodies. Those who have not lived through war may never be able to fully share the embodied knowledge gained by those who have, but access to personal accounts and experiences of war can 'help frame what we think war is',[60] deepening our understanding of war.

This notion of deepening one's understanding of war through a physical or emotional bond or sharing of experience is central to efforts by Youth Army and Victory Volunteers to instil military values in Russia's youth. It is visible in two types of their practices. First, youth and veterans are brought together to establish connections between the generations, and especially for veterans to share war stories with youngsters. While members of these youth groups read the accounts written by and about those who have experienced war, books do not convey the life stories in all their emotional intensity—the witnessing of the flesh, perhaps—in the way of person-to-person transmission.[61] The second practice involves getting young people to experience something close to war: dressing up in uniforms (sometimes replicas of those worn during the Great Patriotic War); learning to fire weapons and carry out military duties; or participating in performances and role play. Through these embodied practices, the groups provide personal and sensory experiences to give youth meaningful insights into the nature of war. It is

(Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013); Kevin McSorley, ed., *War and the body: militarisation, practice and experience* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013); Swati Parashar, 'What wars and "war bodies" know about International Relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26: 4, 2013, pp. 615–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2013.837429.

[56] Kevin McSorley, 'Conclusion: rethinking war and the body', in McSorley, *War and the body*, p. 233.

[57] Ian Graham Ronald Shaw, 'Playing war', *Social & Cultural Geography* 11: 8, 2010, pp. 789–803 at p. 797, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2010.521855.

[58] Kevin McSorley, 'Helmetcams, militarized sensation and "Somatic War"', *Journal of War and Cultural Studies* 5: 1, 2012, pp. 47–58, https://doi.org/10.1386/jwcs.5.1.47_1.

[59] Yuval Noah Harari, 'Scholars, eyewitnesses and flesh-witnesses of war: a tense relationship', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 7: 2, 2009, pp. 213–28 at p. 214, https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0147.

[60] Synne L. Dyvik, 'Of bats and bodies: methods for reading and writing embodiment', *Critical Military Studies* 2: 1–2, 2016, pp. 56–69 at p. 58, https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2016.1184471; see also Synne L. Dyvik, '"Valhalla rising": gender, embodiment and experience in military memoirs', *Security Dialogue* 47: 2, 2016, pp. 133–50 at p. 134, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010615615730.

[61] On the importance of the telling and hearing of life stories, see Dyvik, 'Of bats and bodies', p. 58.

the closest equivalent to an actual experience of war and adheres to the philosophy of learning through flesh witnessing by way of a 'direct sensory experience'.[62] Therefore, by centring the emotional element of war that the veteran experienced, veteran–youth exchanges promote a deeper level of engagement with militarization than militainment.

Becoming a hero: embodiment and the militarization of Russia's youth

Veterans dominate official Russian discourses around wartime heroes and heroism. In addition to 'normal' discourses that depict Great Patriotic War veterans as icons of bravery and self-sacrifice who saved the Soviet Union (USSR) and, indeed, the world, from Nazism, since February 2022 the state has drawn parallels between the behaviours of Nazi Germany (the Holocaust, the attack on the USSR) and regime claims that modern-day Ukraine is controlled by fascists who commit acts of genocide against ethnic Russians and pose an existential threat to Russia itself. Veterans of Russia's war in Ukraine are also presented as role models for young people. Youth Army focuses on these more recent veterans, who are much closer to their members' age and life experience than veterans of the Great Patriotic War. The young people learn about veterans who have fought in Ukraine, especially those who were previously Youth Army members, including those who died fighting in the war and are listed on the 'Memory Alley' page on the group's website,[63] creating another opportunity for young people to be prepared for the idea of war by the examples of their peers who are joining Russia's armed forces to fight in Ukraine and dying 'heroically' for their country.

In addition to being idolized for their willingness to risk their lives for their country, veterans occupy a space in between war and peace, military service and civilian life.[64] But while veterans in western countries can become unwelcome reminders of the human costs of war, Russia actively seeks to use their experiences to encourage young people to imagine themselves in the position of former war participants. Since the 1960s Moscow has used veterans to teach elements of the state's patriotic education curriculum, with veterans visiting schools to deliver state-approved messages glorifying patriotism, loyalty and military service.[65] But while these school visits do not require veterans to reflect on their own experiences in the armed forces, Youth Army and Victory Volunteers bring young people and veterans together precisely for that reason. Veterans are encouraged to share personal memories of war, military service and their lives both before and after they were transformed by war. This practice sustains the dominant militarizing discourses that we identify in the introduction. The emphasis on the veterans' ordinary lives before and after their participation in war confirms that

[62] Harari, 'Scholars, eyewitnesses and flesh-witnesses of war', p. 218.
[63] 'Alleya pamyati' [Memory Alley], Youth Army website, https:/www.yunarmy.ru/for-you/alley-memory.
[64] Sarah Bulmer and Maya Eichler, 'Unmaking militarized masculinity: veterans and the project of military-to-civilian transition', *Critical Military Studies* 3: 2, 2017, pp. 161–81 at p. 162, https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1320055.
[65] Elena Racheva, *By us alone: army veterans, patriotic values and the re-militarization of Russia*, 1991–2022, PhD diss., Oxford University, 2022.

war can and does happen to anyone—it is a normal part of life for Russians. The Victory Volunteers website, for example, describes veterans as 'ordinary soldiers who changed the course of historical events with their heroic deeds'.[66] If these war heroes were just ordinary Russians who answered their country's call to serve, then truly anyone can be a hero, including the young people listening to these inspiring life stories. We argue that the participation of veterans in Youth Army and Victory Volunteers activities and the implicit and explicit messages that they deliver do more than blur the boundaries between war and peace, military and civilian. They suggest that such boundaries are meaningless.

Veterans as heroic role models: conveying the realities of war

While the Russian state conveys its own narratives about wartime heroism through formal channels, encounters between veterans and young people that are organized by Youth Army and Victory Volunteers are key sites for informing and inspiring young people about heroic wartime deeds. The emphasis on in-person meetings between veterans and young people suggests that the groups are attempting to overcome some of the limitations of comprehending war without direct personal experience. The meetings can also accomplish other state objectives, including promoting patriotism and an interest in Russian history among youth, as well as providing young people with living role models of everyday heroes. Meeting veterans and hearing their stories is presented in the groups' press releases as making a powerful impression on the young people. As one Victory Volunteer is quoted as saying:

> A meeting with a veteran is, first of all, a manifestation of a sense of patriotism and citizenship, a sense of gratitude for those who died during the Great Patriotic War, surviving veterans and people of the older generation, interest in the historical past of our country and pride in the victory that these people brought us.[67]

The stories highlight the veterans' heroic traits, such as courage, self-sacrifice and devotion to country and duty. There is a clear theme of depicting certain heroic qualities as inherently Russian: 'the Russian soldier is a noble warrior … the embodiment of a special strength of mind: courage, bravery, selflessness, fearlessness and valour'.[68]

These virtues stand as a marker that a true and good Russian patriot will naturally act to 'defend' their country when in need, and the militarizing discourse promoting the idea that war is inevitable and a normal circumstance for the Russian

[66] 'Volontery Pobedy prinyali ychastie v otkrytii patrioticheskoi vystavki' [Victory Volunteers took part in the opening of a patriotic exhibition], Victory Volunteers (Ivanovo region), 30 April 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5444.

[67] 'Volontery Pobedy prodolzhayut naveshchat geroev' [Victory Volunteers continue to visit the heroes], Victory Volunteers (Kaluga region), 27 Feb. 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/4758.

[68] 'Victory Volunteers took part in the opening of a patriotic exhibition'. Sacrifice and loyalty are traits not only attributed to Russia's soldiers but also used to describe the character of the Russian people: Gregory Carleton, 'A Russia born of war', in Lotte Jensen, ed., *The roots of nationalism: national identity formation in early modern Europe, 1600–1815* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), pp. 153–66.

people makes the prominence of these statements on the Russian character even more compelling because it suggests the youth will one day have the opportunity to showcase them. The normality of war is also conveyed in the retelling of veterans' stories to young people by embedding their wartime experiences within their ordinary civilian lives before and after the war. The adult leaders of Youth Army and Victory Volunteers could have chosen to focus only on wartime heroic deeds. Instead, there is emphasis—sometimes considerable emphasis—on pre- and post-war life.

A good example of this practice is the story that veteran Pavel Timofeevich shares with youngsters. After describing some of the harsh realities of war including difficult living conditions, Timofeevich spoke about his 55-year career in medicine following his wartime service, which sets his civilian contributions to society alongside his contributions to victory in the war.[69] The stories told through the youth groups' press releases depict the post-war years as a difficult period for the Russian people—perhaps as difficult, although in different ways, as the war itself. Hardships are described quite frankly and veterans—whether they fought on the front lines, worked on the home front, or were children of war—are described as stepping up to the challenge to reconstruct the war-damaged country. Evgenia Nikolaevna Serotto, who was a child during the war, is described as telling young people:

> Times were especially hard after the war. People lived in dugouts or in tents, there were no clothes, they walked in torn felt boots. But no one was afraid of work: to earn a piece of bread, they sawed firewood, mowed hay in the summer.[70]

The power of these stories and the militarizing discourses that they perpetuate lies in the very ordinariness of the heroism achieved through rising to meet the demands of war, making these veteran heroes relatable to young Russians in a way that stories about war heroes from noble backgrounds—such as Tsar Peter I (Peter the Great)—simply cannot.

Feeling like a hero: the emotions of wartime heroism

While hearing the stories of war veterans is important, Youth Army and Victory Volunteers press releases signal that Russia's youth are also expected to share in the veterans' emotions to understand the extent of victories achieved or suffering endured through war. We did not expect to see the emphasis on sharing emotions feature so strongly in comparison to other forms of embodiment such as role play. But it is clear from the descriptions of these activities that entering the emotional life of wartime and the veteran is regarded by these patriotic youth groups as a crucial part of the experience.

[69] 'Volontery Pobedy pozdravili veteranov Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny' [Victory Volunteers congratulated veterans of the Great Patriotic War], Victory Volunteers (Kaluga region), 10 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5402.

[70] 'Po vsei Rossii i na Donbasse Volontery Pebedy pozdravlyayut veteranov s Dnem Pobedy' [Victory Volunteers congratulate veterans all over Russia and Donbass on Victory Day], Victory Volunteers, 5 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5311.

Emotions can be shared during the veterans' recounting of their stories. As they relive their wartime experiences and the emotions that they felt at the time, the veterans bring their listeners along with them, as this Victory Volunteers press release indicates, quoting unnamed 'activists' of the movement:

> Interviews with veterans, home front workers and children of the war, that will be placed on the Memory Day portal,[71] will be able not only to present well-known facts about the war to everyone, but also to convey human emotions, feelings and, thanks to this, make us closer to the real heroes of our country.[72]

The young people are expected to feel a range of emotions, including grief for those who died, as well as pride and happiness in the achievements of veterans both living and dead. In the words attributed to Victory Volunteers ambassador (Altai branch) Sofia Gorbunova,

> The emotions from Victory Day are indescribable. When the Victory banner was carried out, I cried and watched the entire Parade with great pleasure and delight.

The Victory Volunteers website also quoted insights from Victory Volunteers ambassador (Perm branch) Denis Shakhabatdinov:

> The Parade itself left a great feeling, a lot of impressions, emotions, since I always watched this Parade on TV as a child and dreamed of getting to this main event. I remember one moment when we saw the veterans in their homes, they told their stories, their emotions, they thanked us. It was so touching, and just an unforgettable feeling![73]

Similarly, on witnessing the Immortal Regiment march,[74] Victory Volunteers ambassador (Voronezh) Anya Peregudova, reportedly reflected:

> We couldn't hold back our emotions. Many of us stood with tears in our eyes as thousands of portraits of warriors floated by! … These emotions have become the strongest in my volunteer practice.[75]

The Victory Day parades and associated celebrations are drenched with emotion and characterized by moving encounters. Spectators often participate in such activities to feel an emotional connection to the event, as well as to others who participate

[71] Visitors to the Memory Day website can watch videos of veterans of the Great Patriotic War talking about their wartime experiences and light a virtual candle in return for making a small donation towards veterans' medical care.

[72] 'Federalnyi proekt "Sveta pamyati" v Voronezhskoi oblasti' [Federal project 'Candle of Memory' in Voronezh region], Victory Volunteers (Voronezh region), 25 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5556.

[73] 'Posly Pobedy ot Permskogo kraya delyatsya vpechatleniyami o Parade Pobedy v Moskve' [Ambassadors of the Victory from Perm Territory share their impressions of the Victory Parade in Moscow], Victory Volunteers (Perm Krai), 11 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5787.

[74] Immortal Regiments are processions held in towns and cities across Russia on Victory Day (9 May) in which participants carry photographs of family members who participated in the Great Patriotic War.

[75] 'V etom godu 2 predstavitelya Voronezhskoi oblasti stali uchastnikami nezabyvaemykh sobytii—Parada Pobedy na Krasnoi ploshchadi i shestviya "Bessmertnyi polk"' [This year, 2 representatives of the Voronezh region became participants in unforgettable events—the Victory Parade on Red Square and the Immortal Regiment procession], Victory Volunteers, 11 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5421. Also see, for example, '"Bessmertnyi polk" v Moskve' ['Immortal regiment' in Moscow], Victory Volunteers (Samara region), 11 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5467.

in it and to its wider message.[76] This can also be said of the personal meetings with the veterans, and other embodied experiences organized by these youth groups that enable young people to connect emotionally and invest in the values of militarization, especially the glorification of sacrifice and loyalty to the state. The material that Youth Army and Victory Volunteers produce reveal that the state is not content for youth to be passive vessels for these militarizing discourses, but instead expects them to respond at a visceral level: to feel the glory of war.

Acting like a hero: performance and role playing

Youth Army and Victory Volunteer leaders also aim to bring heroic experiences to life for today's young people by organizing activities that mimic wartime. This can include visiting an immersive museum exhibition that gives visitors the impression that they are present during historic battles. Victory Volunteers who visited Ivanovo's patriotic exhibition reportedly felt they were 'rushing along with the cavalry of the guards along the Borodino field' and 'fighting the enemy in the sky in the cockpit of a Soviet fighter'.[77] Role playing also features in some activities, for example taking on the role of war correspondents to find out more about a specific wartime event.

Recreating aspects of a soldier's life in wartime is another way to provide insights into the lives of everyday heroes. For example, Youth Army and Victory Volunteers use army-style field kitchens to cater for events, including offering young people the opportunity to 'taste soldiers' porridge'.[78] Even persevering in their actions in difficult conditions, such as adverse weather, indicates a willingness on the part of the young people to suffer for the sake of veterans and the cause of remembering wartime heroes, creating another sensory experience bringing youth closer to the hardships that veterans endured.[79] Unsurprisingly, learning and practising the skills of a soldier, such as building shelters and setting up a rope crossing,[80] identifying the guns used during the Great Patriotic War,[81] or disassembling and reassembling a Kalashnikov rifle[82] also feature in the activities of both youth groups, especially Youth Army.

[76] Doug Matthews, *Why we love parades: the history and enduring appeal* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2023), p. 9.
[77] 'Victory Volunteers took part in the opening of a patriotic exhibition'.
[78] See, for example, 'Yunarmeitsy prishli na den otkrytykh dverei umts avangard' [Youth Army members came to the open day of the Avangard Educational Centre], Youth Army website, 5 June 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20221201031535/https:/yunarmy.ru/press-center/news/yunarmeytsy-prishli-na-den-otkrytykh-dverey-umts-avangard; '70 tysyach lipchan obedinili parad poebdy v shestvie "Bessmertnogo polka"' [70,000 residents of Lipa united the Victory Parade and the procession of the 'Immortal Regiment'], Victory Volunteers (Lipetsk region), 10 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5374.
[79] 'Ambassadors of the Victory from Perm Territory share their impressions of the Victory Parade in Moscow'.
[80] 'Yunarmeitsy strany posetyat vserossiiskiy tematicheskiy forum "Yunarmiya za"' [The country's Youth Army members will attend the All-Russian thematic forum 'Youth Army ZA'], Youth Army website, 26 May 2022, https://yunarmy.ry/press-center/news/yunarmeytsy-strany-posetyat-vserossiyskiy-tematicheskiy-forum-yunarmiya-za/, accessed on 5 April 2024.
[81] 'Volontery Pobedy Volgogradskoi oblasti proveli kvest-igru "Velikaya Pobeda"' [Victory Volunteers of the Volgograd region held a quest game 'The Great Victory'], Victory Volunteers (Volgograd region), 9 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5813.
[82] 'Nagrazhdenie patrioticheskogo etapa konkursa "Mister NGTU"' [Awarding the patriotic stage of the compe

Emphasis is also placed on demonstrating heroic qualities and developing the young people's own heroic stories by helping others in civilian settings, in the tradition of the hero as protector of the weak and vulnerable. We see this in the materials produced by both youth groups, but it is a more prevalent theme for Victory Volunteers. Helping veterans in various ways is central to the mission of that youth group and includes planting flowers in their window boxes and gardens[83] and escorting them to Moscow and other cities to take part in Victory Day celebrations,[84] as well as raising money for their care.[85] But there is also a specific focus on Victory Volunteers and Youth Army members supporting children from the Donbas region of Ukraine.[86] This context for demonstrating the caring and nurturing side of heroism links the dominant focus of this group (commemorating the sacrifices and victories of the Great Patriotic War) with the current war in Ukraine, thus neatly tying together the two conflicts in a way that is consistent with the official narrative.

Conclusions

Anyone can be a hero. This deceptively simple idea lies at the heart of an important and ambitious strand of patriotic education in Putin's Russia. Through the activities organized by popular state-affiliated youth groups such as Youth Army and Victory Volunteers, children and young people in Russia are presented with opportunities not only to imagine themselves as heroes but to undergo very similar experiences to those of wartime heroes, especially heroes of the most iconic historical event of recent times in Russia: the Great Patriotic War. Through personal meetings with war veterans as well as immersive and interactive techniques, young people are not only able to hear and see but also to touch and feel aspects of life in military and wartime settings, including experiencing some of the emotions provoked by such experiences. The emphasis on embodied experiences, we believe, is intended to make these activities more meaningful and memorable to the young participants and to forge a connection with previous generations. And by presenting wartime heroism as the ideal to which young people can aspire, heroism itself is placed in a distinctly militarized environment. Anyone can be a hero, but young

tition 'Mr NST'], Victory Volunteers (Nizhny Novgorod region), 28 Feb. 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/4784.

[83] 'Volontery Pobedy vysazhivayut tsvety pered oknami uchastnikov Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny' [Victory Volunteers plant flowers in front of the windows of the participants of the Great Patriotic War], Victory Volunteers, 4 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5290.

[84] 'V Krasnoyarskom krae sostoyalos pervoe obuchenie volonterov "Bessmertnogo polka"' [The first training of the Immortal Regiment volunteers took place in the Krasnoyarsk Territory], Victory Volunteers (Krasnoyarsk region), 6 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5318.

[85] 'Vserossiiskaya aktsiya "Krasnaya Gvozdika" startovala v Primore' [All-Russian campaign 'Red Carnation' started in Primorye], Victory Volunteers (Primorsky Krai), 4 May 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5286.

[86] See, for example, 'Volontery Pobedy daryat prazdnik detyam s Donbassa' [Victory Volunteers give a holiday to children from Donbas], Victory Volunteers, 1 June 2022, https://xn--90abhd2amfbbjkx2jf6f.xn--p1ai/news/id/5533; 'Ryazanskaya oblast podkhvatila estafetu dobra' [Ryazan region picks up the 'baton of kindness'], Youth Army website, 7 April 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20240907213441/https://yunarmy.ru/press-center/news/-ryazanskaya-oblast-podkhvatila-estafetu-dobra.

people who have participated in activities organized by one of these youth groups are encouraged to conclude that contributing to their country's war effort, in whatever capacity, offers them their best chances of fulfilling the heroic potential latent within them.

Our analysis of the material presented in this article indicates some explicit links between hero-constructing actions and Russia's war in Ukraine. Youth Army tends to highlight the military careers of Russian soldiers who have fought in the 'special military operation', while Victory Volunteers use the presence of child refugees from the war in the Donbas as an opportunity for their members to demonstrate the caring and protective aspects of heroic behaviour. But while the war in Ukraine is clearly part of the background and context to the activities of these groups, the message they convey to young people is broader: that there is something inherently noble and admirable, as well as adventurous and exciting, about war, and that it is the duty of Russia's young people to be prepared for the time when they will be called upon to defend their homeland from an enemy. While we cannot yet judge the effectiveness of the militarizing techniques employed by Youth Army and Victory Volunteers on their young audiences, the material analysed in this article provides clear evidence that the Russian state intends societal support for war to continue well beyond the current conflict in Ukraine.

If Russia succeeds in its efforts to get the next generation of its citizens to accept the normalcy of war, then the implications for future Russia—including post-Putin Russia—are far-reaching. A society that has grown up believing that war is a normal part of life is likely to accept or, indeed, support rather than resist the state's use of military force to achieve foreign policy aims. A militarized society is also likely to make significant sacrifices and to endure suffering, hardship and loss to ensure victory. In this respect, the decision by Youth Army and the Victory Volunteers to present frank and relatively unvarnished versions of veterans' personal stories is especially significant. Exposure to danger, separation from family and friends, and real, material deprivation are presented as part of both the wartime and postwar experiences to be expected, endured and overcome. It is partly for these reasons that veterans are depicted as heroes and that Russian children are encouraged to regard them as role models to emulate when it is their turn to experience war.

A future Russia with a war-supportive, militarized society could have significant consequences for international security. A post-Putin Russian leadership that is confident of societal support for war might adopt reckless and risk-taking behaviour and become—or continue to be—a significant source of instability in Eurasia. Russia's war in Ukraine has already provided us with a glimpse into such a possible future, where the work of international institutions such as the United Nations is seriously disrupted, alliance systems re-examine the strength of their foundations and western states struggle to find ways of dealing with Moscow. A militarized Russian society is only one enabling factor for such a future, but it is a powerful one, and the potential for the self-perpetuation of militarization

should not be underestimated. While many external observers pin their hopes for a more peaceful future in Europe (and further afield) on Putin's successor as head of government, Russia's current leadership has already begun a process that it clearly hopes will deliver the next generation of heroes. This process has the potential to become the basis of 'forever wars': when children still in school are raised to expect that participation in war will be their fate, and to welcome it with open arms.