

One Soldier's War and the New Literary War Hero

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*I don't want a chronicle...I want people to understand how we felt inside. Then they can judge us.
Dmitry Solovyov, 'The Slope.'*

In literature and in real life, there is a new type of veteran. From the West's GWOT (Global War on Terror) 'hitters'¹ to the generation Russia lost to Chechnya, the days of victory parades, shared belief and struggle, and the romanticized idea of the 'War Hero' or 'Veteran' is gone, vanquished by a lack of significant and domestically popular wars. Instead of the large-scale, clear-cut battles of the two World Wars, a fragmented and asymmetrical global conflict environment has been created, as the major world powers—notably, the US and the UK/Commonwealth countries in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya—have become embroiled in long-running asymmetrical conflicts – conflicts not well understood by their respective creators or participants, and most certainly not by the civilian populace. Along with a new geopolitical reality, this has given rise to a new type of war literature, as veterans and witnesses of these recent wars attempt to tell their truth to what they frequently perceive to be an indifferent or hostile audience back home, and bridge a gap which they themselves often claim to be unbridgeable. Rather than containing detailed historical accounts or stirring tales of heroism, this new war literature tends to be polyphonic, non-linear, and inwardly directed, with a focus on the inner lives of the protagonists, who may be the 'enemy' as well as the 'good guys.' Instead of extolling their heroism or discussing the pros and cons of the war as a whole, its authors often subvert the tropes of the war story, and seem primarily concerned with making an emotional connection with their readers and describing what *their* war was like—and, sometimes even more searingly, what it was like to come home from it.

In the past few years, a growing number of English-language works have come out that exemplify this trend: from the US perspective, Phil Klay's 2014 collection of short stories *Redeployment*, David Abram's 2017 novel *Brave Deeds*, and Brian Van Reet's 2017 novel *Spoils*;

¹ A self-designation that can be found on the web: e.g., the site OAF Nation has a 'Hitter Reading List' of appropriately macho reading material: <http://oafnation.com/books/>.

on the British side, Andy Owen’s 2016 novella *East of Coker* and Harry Parker’s 2016 novel *Anatomy of a Soldier*. Nevertheless, some of the first examples of this fragmented, impressionistic, and emotionally intense war writing were produced in Russia, by veterans and witnesses of the two Chechen wars. One of the earliest, most controversial, and most widely hailed works is Arkadii Babchenko’s *One Soldier’s War*, a collection of stories about his two tours of duty in Chechnya and his subsequent return to the conflict zone as a war correspondent. In his stories, Babchenko unflinchingly describes the brutal realities of the wars in Chechnya, as well as his own, generally non-heroic, reactions to the horrors that he faced. While the context of *One Soldier’s War* is specific, and Babchenko claims that no one who has not experienced the Chechen conflicts can understand or appreciate what he and his comrades went through,² an examination of *One Soldier’s War* suggests that, to the contrary, there is much that unites the Russian experience in Chechnya with the US/UK experience in Iraq, and that this is an international literary trend.

Paradoxically, given that emotional connection seems to be the driving goal behind this new war literature, one of its main unifying themes is the sense of isolation from civilian society. Academics and soldiers alike warn of the increasing disconnect between soldiers³—the ‘warrior class’—and civilians: as author Brian Van Reet says, in the US we now have a ‘samurai class that fights the wars.’⁴ In wars involving state actors (conventional war fought between countries over a clash of freedoms, ideology, or invasion) there is a clear sense of nationalism and collective buy-in. In the Allied countries during WWII, for example, almost everyone was bought in—and in the case of Russia, almost everyone was a member of the ‘warrior class.’ However, the current war on terror waged by major world powers has changed the notion of what it means to be a soldier, even as civilian exposure to conflict has been reduced. While the Russian Civil War and the USSR’s participation in WWII was largely within its own borders, and the draft during WWII and, for the US, Vietnam, led to widespread, if largely male, service from all parts of society, these aspects are lacking from

² For a critique of this type of ‘combat Gnosticism,’ in which only veterans with first-hand knowledge of the war in question, and preferably of infantry combat, that is a feature of both Russian and Western contemporary war writing, see David A. Buchanan’s *Going Scapegoat*. Although Buchanan (himself a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan) makes a number of pertinent points, in this article we will focus on Babchenko’s point of view that firsthand experience is essential.

³ See for example Jennifer Benitz’s piece ‘Making the Civilian-Military Divide Less Divisive,’ Bruce Fleming’s article ‘Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide,’ Jim Garamones’s press release ‘Admiral discusses need to bridge U.S. military-civilian divide,’ or Louise Stanton’s dissertation ‘The Civilian-Military Divide: Obstacles to the Integration of Intelligence in the United States.’

⁴ Brian Van Reet, phone interview, 10/19/17.

these countries’ current military engagements. Russia’s combat operations in Afghanistan and Syria were and are outside of the traditional borders of the Russian Empire/USSR, and Chechnya has only ever been very tenuously part of Russia, leading both soldiers and civilians to feel that they were fighting unjust, pointless wars on foreign soil. And while Russia still has universal male conscription, the extensive use of contract soldiers in Chechnya instilled the belief on both sides that the people doing the fighting were mainly in it for the money, and deserved what they got. In the West the disconnect is even more pronounced, with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan taking place thousands of miles away, and a very small percentage of the population participating at any level—for instance, less than 1% of the US population is currently on active duty or in the reserves.⁵ This has led to ambiguity in the civilian-military relationship in these countries, and may fuel the seemingly contradictory theme prevalent in current war writing, in which veteran-authors seek to present themselves as the bearers of a special insight unattainable to those who have not experienced combat, while also trying to convey the truth of what they experienced, often in highly emotional terms.⁶

While the wars in Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Iraq were officially justified as being necessary to protect civilians at home from a genuine terrorist threat, later allegations of collusion of the Russian government in the acts that were used as justification for the second Chechen war, and the lack of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, turned world public opinion against the wars, while revelations of human rights abuses committed on all sides sparked further outrage. Veterans of these recent wars have reported a high frequency of disconcerting encounters with civilians, who often respond with either judgmental

⁵ ‘2013 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community,’ US Department of Defense, <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2013-Demographics-Report.pdf>, Accessed 12/3/17.

⁶ For example, the following excerpt from ‘Rock Bottom: Self-Retribution Through Self-Purification,’ by poster ZeroMorphine on the site OAF Nation, with its heightened non-heroic emotional states (crying, screaming, or being frozen in terror are common) and the desperate need for an emotional connection the writer believes to be unobtainable, can be taken as typical:

‘You beg for the empty feeling in your chest to stop. You beg for the pain in your bones to just go away. You try to cry, but you haven’t felt tears since it was cold outside. Every now again you hear a buzz vibrate on the dresser cabinet, but you eventually beg for that to stop too. Same message every mother fucking time.

I’m here for you, bro...
Pick up your phone, bro...
Where are you, bro?...
Call me back, bro...

You laugh to cover the screams because they don’t know you.

accusations or prurient questions along the lines of ‘Did you kill anyone?’⁷ This line of questioning is not just limited to personal interactions: Arkadii Babchenko is routinely asked this during his TV and radio interviews, while fellow Russian veteran and author Zakhar Prilepin furiously lashed out against it in the article ‘Krovososy’ (‘Bloodsuckers’) after being grilled about his kills during a recent TV appearance. The assumption of being ‘tainted’⁸ by participation in these unpopular recent wars can make reintegration back into civilian life even more difficult for veterans, who already struggle with PTSD and, in many cases, physical injuries.

Unsurprisingly, suicide, addiction, and homelessness⁹ rates paint a bleak picture for the GWOT hitters. However, Western society has at least attempted, albeit with only moderate success, to assimilate veterans back into society, both through social support initiatives and through educational opportunities such as writing programs.

The reality for Russian veterans is much grimmer, as detailed by the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers and activist journalists, most famously Anna Politkovskaia, but perhaps best conveyed by a Russian veteran himself: infantryman, journalist, and author Arkadii Babchenko. He was drafted in 1995 and ended up serving part of his two-year term of service in the North Caucasus, including in Chechnya during the first war. He was discharged in 1997 and returned to university, where he received a degree in international law. But when the second war broke out in 1999, Babchenko volunteered for it. Why he did so, even he struggles to explain. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he says that ‘[t]he way it drew me back was unbearable. Only my body had come back from the first war. My mind stayed there. My body walked around and looked at this world without understanding it. And seeing as the world didn’t accept my body, it returned to where my mind was,’ and that he had developed an ‘adrenaline dependency.’¹⁰

He was demobilized for the second time in 2000. Then began a chequered career as a journalist, blogger, political activist, and, somewhat accidentally, writer. ‘I did not mean to write a book,’ he says in the preface, ‘I just couldn’t carry war within myself any longer. I

⁷ Andy Owen, Skype interview, 10/7/17.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Suicide rates for US veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are more than 3 times higher the rates for the general population, and unemployment rates are close to 50% higher than those of the general population (Luis Martinez, ‘US Veterans: By the Numbers,’ *ABC News*, 11 November 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-veterans-numbers/story?id=14928136#1> Accessed 12/3/17).

¹⁰ Meg Clothier, ‘No Quiet on the Chechen Front,’ *The Guardian*, 21 November 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/21/biography> Accessed 6/20/17.

needed to speak my mind, to squeeze the war out of my system.’¹¹ The result was a series of stories based on his experiences in Chechnya, for which he won the Debut Prize for Courage in Literature in 2001. *One Soldier’s War* (released as *One Soldier’s War in Chechnya* in Britain), in which a number of his stories were collected together and organized into a book, was translated into English and published in Britain and the US in 2007, receiving rave reviews by English-language war writers and reviewers. It has been published in 22 countries and translated into 16 different languages.¹²

Back in Russia, however, Babchenko’s reception was decidedly mixed. Although he was named one of the founding writers of the new genre of Chechen war prose,¹³ and the Debut Prize notwithstanding, some questioned the literary and aesthetic value of his work, criticizing the tone of the story as ‘one of grievance and complaint,’¹⁴ forcing readers sitting comfortably back in Moscow to feel bad about what was happening to Russian citizens in a faraway part of Russia. In recent years, Babchenko has become an outspoken critic of Russian society and the Putin regime, particularly its annexation of Crimea and involvement in the war in eastern Ukraine, a stance which forced him to flee the country in order to escape persecution.

One Soldier’s War reflects the contradictions and divisions of Babchenko’s experience, and is one of the earliest and most striking examples of the fragmented literature produced by the disintegrating experience of participating in the asymmetrical warfare that characterizes the current battlefield.¹⁵ The book is divided into three sections of unequal lengths. The first, and shortest, section is a series of short vignettes, arranged in non-chronological order and with few concrete details about place and time. It is only by comparing them to the later sections that it becomes evident that these stories contain the same characters as the later,

¹¹ Arkady Babchenko, *One Soldier’s War*, trans. by Nick Allen (New York: Grove Press, 2007), xi.

¹² Arkady Babchenko, ‘Voina ot pervogo litsa. Interv’iu v “Trude,”’ LiveJournal post, 11 May 2012, <http://starshinazapasa.livejournal.com/396147.html> Accessed 6/26/17.

¹³ Andrei Rudalyov, ‘Obyknovennaia voina: Proza o chechenskoii kampanii,’ *Zhurnalnyi zal*, <http://magazines.russ.ru/druzhba/2006/5/ru14.html> Accessed 7/6/17.

¹⁴ Valeriia Pustovaia, ‘Guy with a Gun—Condemned Man, Rebel, Writer: ‘War’ Prose by Young Authors,’ *Russian Studies in Literature*, 42:2 (Spring 2006), 77.

¹⁵ Although the tactics utilized in Chechnya differed somewhat from those in Iraq and Afghanistan, they all featured a larger, ostensibly more powerful force fighting against small groups of guerrilla fighters who often relied on hidden explosives and suicide bombings to wreak havoc, before disappearing back into the supposedly friendly civilian populace. This uncertainty seems to be a shared feature of all these recent wars: Andy Owen describes his experience of it as ‘you’re never really sure, when you’re in some of these places, what your role is and what you’re doing,’ leading to a fragmented literature in order to convey the psychological destruction of the experience (Skype interview 10/7/17).

longer, stories about Babchenko’s service in the second war. The second, and by far the longest, section is in approximate chronological order and chronicles Babchenko’s actual service, from his first arrival in the North Caucasus in 1995, during the first war, to his return to civilian life following his second tour of duty in the spring of 2000. The third section, made up of fairly short stories, contains Babchenko’s post-war journalistic writings on other soldiers, both in the combat zone and afterwards, as they struggle (and fail) to assimilate back into civilian life.¹⁶ As is common in contemporary war literature, the stories focus not just on people with whom Babchenko feels a personal affinity, but on people who are decidedly Other to him: he includes a story about women serving in Chechnya on both sides of the conflict, one on criminals who fought in penal battalions, and one on Russians who defected to the Chechen side. It is clear that Babchenko struggles to feel a deep connection with any of these groups, but he still tries to tell their stories and share what he believes their experiences and motivations must have been. This trend is echoed in some of the most recent Western war literature, in which the Western and mostly male authors tell their stories from the point of view of female participants and/or the jihadist ‘enemy,’ in order to explore the feeling states engendered by the war, and perhaps find common ground with someone who can understand.

Underscoring the importance of emotional rather than factual truth, the rich detail of *One Soldiers’ War* is mainly ahistorical—it is often difficult to place exactly when and where, in the greater scheme of the war, the stories are taking place. Babchenko tells us in the preface that while the book is for the most part autobiographical, and everything in it is true, ‘[a] few stories have been compiled from several real episodes that have been compressed into a single period and shifted in time. Some events I did not witness personally but I can vouch for their veracity.’¹⁷ The stories are thus ‘true’ in the sense that they are based on real events, but they represent an emotional, psychological truth as much or more than they list external events. The book uses the author’s autobiographical experiences, and the autobiographical form as a jumping-off point, a way of grounding the text and giving it a level of authority that non-autobiographical fiction cannot claim.

¹⁶ When asked about the organization of the book, Babchenko said that he and the editor worked together on the order of the stories, but did not provide concrete details of the organizational process (Facebook correspondence 9/6/17). The impression he gives when speaking of the book and its structure is that it arose organically, without much deliberate planning.

¹⁷ Babchenko, *One Soldier’s War*, xi.

War stories lend themselves naturally to the archetypes of a heroic descent into the underworld, and a heroic return from it. Babchenko’s non-fictional account of his own war experiences is, on the surface, highly subversive of the typical war story, stripping it of all its heroic trappings. Instead of high-action combat scenes, Babchenko concentrates mainly on the non-combat aspect of war; when combat does take place, much of the writing is focused on the narrator’s intense sensations of fear and his disempowering experiences, as he comes under attack from his own comrades in arms as well as the enemy.

In the opening stories of the first section, combat is notably absent—the reader is teased by the possibility that combat is happening elsewhere, but never shown it directly. The possibility of it only appears in the third story, ‘Chechens,’ when the soldiers realize that their chosen building is next to one occupied by Chechen rebels, but, ‘[s]pitting on the war and ignoring security regulations as we hankered after comfort, we had chosen a mousetrap that afforded us no escape route.’¹⁸ They are not shot, however—not because their Chechen counterparts didn’t try, but because their Fly rocket launcher jammed when they attempted to fire it. The reader anticipates exciting scenes of military valor, but in ‘Chechens,’ it all comes to naught: the expected attack never happens due to equipment malfunction.

It is not until ‘Chechens II,’ the fourth story, that any actual shooting takes place. The narrator hears a shot just as he enters ‘his’ apartment. Terrified, he gets into an undignified struggle with his boots, and then into an equally undignified argument with his partner, Shishigin, who was ‘on the can’ when the shot happened. To their dismay, they now have to go downstairs and investigate the shot. For the first—but not the last—time, Babchenko’s vivid imagination manifests itself in the text, turning a short walk into an epic journey through a hellish fearscape: ‘Each step lasts forever, and in the time it takes to move down the ten-foot-long eternity of the hall it seems a thousand generations have been born and died on earth and the sun burned out and was born anew.’¹⁹ Throughout the trip to the neighbouring apartment, the narrator keeps telling himself, ‘Arkasha, don’t go, don’t go;’²⁰ he goes anyway, only to discover...an empty apartment. Open battle has once again been avoided; in fact, there is no sign of the enemy whatsoever.

¹⁸ Babchenko, *One Soldier’s War*, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

In the first five stories, the soldiers don’t kill anyone at all—on the few occasions when they expect enemy contact, the adversary has already disappeared by the time they arrive. It is only in ‘The Cow,’ story number six, that they are actually shown engaging in violence, when they decide to shoot a dying cow and put her out of her misery. They initially botch the operation, however, and mourn the cow’s death afterwards. In ‘Sharik,’ story number nine, they agonize over whether or not to kill and eat a stray dog whom they have adopted, then consciously make the decision and carry it out with brutal efficiency, before enjoying the fruits—meats—of their labor. Although these stories show the protagonists in a pitiful, at times even goofy, light, they also show them becoming increasingly hardened against death and destruction, able to kill first a cow, a creature humans routinely kill and eat, and then a dog, a creature Russians, like Westerners, generally consider to be a member of the family, not food.

This rising tide of casual violence reaches its apex in the tenth story, ‘The Apartment.’ On the surface it appears almost cloyingly sentimental. The protagonist, speaking in the first person, recounts how he finds and occupies an abandoned apartment in Grozny, going there when he could to rest and indulge in fantasies of simply returning home from an ordinary work day. As part of the imaginary dialogue between him and his wife, though, she asks him, “‘Did you have a good day?’”²¹ “‘Yes,’” he tells her, “‘I killed two people.’”²² This is the first and only time in the cycle—and the entire book—that the protagonist admits to killing actual humans. It shows up as a seemingly meaningless line, just something he says to his ‘wife’ as he’s waiting for her to serve supper, and the killing itself happens off stage, with no details provided. She reacts not with horror, but with the words, “‘Well done, I’m so proud of you!’”²³ The fact that he took two human lives that day is treated as nothing more than another day at the office, something to remark over briefly and then move on to more important matters.

It is, however, the culmination of the violence that the cycle has been flirting with from the beginning, as the protagonist goes from failed attempts to confront the enemy, to killing a cow, to killing a dog, to killing two human beings. Each time, he and his fellow soldiers are more blasé about it: they are terrified of the potential confrontation with the

²¹ Babchenko, *One Soldier’s War*, p. 25.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Chechens in the neighboring apartment, upset over the death of the cow, unhappy over their decision to kill Sharik (which in no way stops them from carrying it out), but here, in the final story of the cycle, killing two humans is nothing more than a good day at work, not even worth describing.

This is a contravention of one of the biggest clichés of war writing, in which a protagonist’s first kill is something to be feared, dreaded, anticipated, and celebrated.²⁴ In the conventions of the genre, the first kill is a defining moment in a soldier’s life, as he (or occasionally, she) frets beforehand over what it will be like, worries that he won’t be able to carry it out, and then discovers that it is either much worse, or much better, than he had expected. Often, the first kill either makes the protagonist realize that he is not cut out for the brutalities of war and turn into a pacifist, or, to the contrary, fills him with a sense of God-like power at the ease with which he can dispose of life, especially human life.

But there is none of that here. Instead, in a contravention of the ‘rules’ of heroic war writing, and the image of the heroic warrior, Babchenko never describes his kills (he has repeatedly said in interviews that he is 95% sure he missed all his targets), instead dwelling at length on the intense physical fear he experiences during operations. Babchenko depicts one of the most vivid ‘fear states’ in ‘The Storming Operation,’ a short story towards the end of Section Two describing the successful (from the Russian perspective) third storming of Grozny. After safely entering the city and spending the night in an abandoned apartment with the rest of his squad, Babchenko is sent to bring a message to another platoon one block down the street:

I have to run across the street but I can’t force myself to leave the yard. After the peace of the early morning this seems far more terrifying than it did yesterday, when we were constantly showered with shrapnel. During this short peaceful morning I have managed to shed the continual readiness to die; I have relaxed and I am now loath to throw myself headfirst back into cold death.

²⁴ For an example of more clichéd war writing and the theme of the ‘first kill’ from a Western perspective, see for instance *Sniper One* by Sgt. Dan Mills, about a British sniper in Iraq, or *American Sniper* by Chris Kyle, both of whom describe their first kills early on in the narrative—Kyle opens the book with his—and in detail, and explicitly express no regrets afterwards. However, in the context of the more ‘literary’ contemporary war writing being produced by veterans, Mills’s and Kyle’s accounts are the exception rather than the rule. And even ‘high kill’ Russian works such as Zakhar Prilepin’s *Patologii* (*Pathologies*) flirt subversively with the ‘kill narrative’: Prilepin’s text, for example, leaves out the identity of the soldiers who carry out the platoon’s first kills in Grozny, attributing it to impersonal, group action.

Finally, I steel myself, draw my lungs full of air, exhale sharply and run out of the open gates in sprints. The street seems to be very large, enormous, like it’s thousands of miles wide, a whole continent covered in very fine smooth asphalt without a single rut that might afford protection. Slowly, like a slug, I am crawling into the sights of some sniper. That’s probably what I look like through a telescopic sight—a small, helpless slug trying to escape death in the middle of a huge street.²⁵

By this point, Babchenko’s autobiographical protagonist goes back and forth between the cool detachment of a hardened warrior and terror on an almost cosmic scale, when a few seconds are stretched out into an eternity, and his imagination paints him as a tiny helpless creature against a vast, hostile background. Two opposing sides of his psyche assume control, depending on the circumstances: when under direct fire, his detached side is in control; when in relative safety, his imagination takes over, dredging up images and ideas from his subconscious and his reptilian hindbrain. In this life-and-death setting, the contrast between them is especially sharp, and the line between them especially thin: war has peeled away the civilized, ‘human’ outer layer of his personality, revealing both the merciless predator, and the fearful prey, underneath. The protagonist is painfully aware of his constant kill-or-be-killed predicament, but the knowledge is so disturbing that he cannot bring himself to face it head-on. Instead, his psyche is forced to blunt this awareness by retreating to a perception of normalcy in abnormal circumstances.

The split in the protagonist’s psyche is particularly clear upon comparison of ‘The Storming Operation’ with ‘The Apartment,’ appearing in the first cycle of stories and both set in Grozny. As the Russian soldiers are camping out in abandoned residential apartments and looting everything they can get their hands on, something Babchenko records without judgment or justification, the protagonist sneaks into ‘his’ apartment every night to engage in fantasies of domestic bliss. Earlier, the first cycle of stories was described as a narrative of increasing violence, culminating in the protagonist’s matter-of-fact acceptance of killing fellow human beings. In contrast with the longer stories in the second half of Section Two, which describe the same time period and events in more detail, the first cycle can also be seen as the protagonist’s growing psychic alienation from his surroundings and himself, peaking in

²⁵ Babchenko, *One Soldier’s War*, pp. 271-2.

his retreat into a solitary fantasy world, as individual moments are sketched out in highly detailed, impressionistic paragraphs.

The alienation of the protagonist from reality is not resolved upon his demobilization and return to civilian life; in fact, it becomes exponentially worse. The last two stories of the book, ‘Operation “Life” Continues’ and ‘I Am a Reminder,’ deal explicitly with the difficulties of reintegrating into civilian society, and the inability of returning veterans to bridge the gap between them and everyone else, even other veterans.

This is brought home in the final story of the book, ‘I Am a Reminder.’ In it, Babchenko interviews a crippled veteran who now begs at a subway station near his apartment in Moscow. Babchenko goes to sit and talk with him, since ‘[h]e is my brother, they all are, brothers given to me by the war. The whole of Moscow is full of such brothers; there’s at least one in each subway.’²⁶ Babchenko is initially able to establish a connection with this other soldier, at least on his end. But his interviewee is so caught up in his own rage and pain that he is unable to reciprocate this understanding. The crippled veteran is furious at what has happened to him, and even more furious that no one back home spoke up against it, dubbing those who did not serve in the war ‘[p]ointless people. A whole world full of pointless people. A lost generation. It’s not we who are the lost generation, it’s them, those who didn’t fight, they are. If their deaths could bring back just one of those boys then I’d kill all of them without hesitating. Every single one of them is my personal enemy.’²⁷

The inseparable bonds of brotherhood between soldiers, forged by wartime experiences, no longer function in civilian life; not only are these men unable to establish connections with civilians, they cannot even relate to each other - not as they could during the war.

Furthermore, they are cut off from the truth as well. *One Soldier’s War* is an attempt to convey the truth of the soldiers’ experiences in Chechnya to those who lack the understanding of what war is truly like. It is ‘one soldier’s war,’ but it is ‘every soldier’s war’ as

²⁶ Babchenko, *One Soldier’s War*, p. 393.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 394. Underscoring the similarities between current Russian and Western literature, the unnamed British vet in Andy Owen’s *East of Coker* expresses very similar sentiments, saying: ‘In the early days of the uber-excessive drinking—I am down to just excessive now—I would get filled with rage. I wanted to avenge those responsible for killing Man-gina. I wanted to hurt them and let them know why they were being hurt. I wanted to attack all those who supported his killers and attack anyone who did not understand the sacrifice he had made for them. I shouted at office workers in pubs who were going on with their lives as if he hadn’t given his life for them. I swung wildly at students I overheard sanctimoniously judging from the safety of a chain bar happy hour. I stared aggressively at anyone who looked remotely Arabic’ (40).

well. Those who participated in the war received, in return for all that they gave up, the true knowledge of war, and of themselves. The war stripped them of the trappings of civilization, gifting them in return with strength, speed, supersensory perception, and moments of overwhelming terror and intense euphoria. Their true natures, good or bad, were revealed to them, and those with any capacity for self-reflection were forced to come face-to-face with their inner natures, the heights they were capable of achieving, and the depths to which they could sink.

But that, it turns out, was all temporary and conditional. Once they were removed from the war, they not only had to become ordinary civilians themselves, but civilians with serious psychological problems and sometimes debilitating physical injuries as well. They are permanently cut off from each other and from the taste of truth and eternity that they bought with their pain in the war. The story, and the entire book, ends on a melancholic note, admitting defeat in its main aim of sharing the story of the war:

‘Half-truths everywhere, half-sincerity, half-friendship. I can’t accept that. Here in civilian life they have only half-truths. And the small measure of truth we had in war was a big lie. So many boys died and I survived. The whole time I used to wonder what for. They were better than I was, but I survived. Surely this not pure chance. Maybe I lived so that others remember us? I am a reminder,’ he says with another evil-sounding laugh.

I get up silently and leave him cigarettes, matches and vodka. There’s nothing else I can give him apart from money. I walk away without saying anything and he doesn’t even look at me. For him I am also ‘one of them.’ Which means whatever I say is a half-truth.²⁸

One Soldier’s War is, without question, a profoundly pessimistic book. It depicts war as a destructive, addictive force, causing people to commit pointless, hideous atrocities for no good reason, and then, instead of freeing themselves when they get the chance, returning to do so again and again, caught up in a co-dependent, self-perpetuating cycle of violence and hatred. Duty, honor, and patriotism are slogans used to bamboozle the naïve into signing up for something that will not only destroy them, but cause them to destroy others in turn.

²⁸ Babchenko, *One Soldier’s War*, p. 395.

The historical moment of the Chechen wars is depicted as one in which these soldiers’ Motherland betrayed them, sending them off to die by the thousands for no good reason, and then condemning the ones who made it back alive to poverty and debilitating psychological distress. Babchenko depicts his generation as one that has been chewed up—sent into the meat grinder, as Chechnya is often called in Russian writing—and spit out, cut off from the preceding, proudly patriotic, Soviet generations, and unable to join the new, consumeristic and materialistic generation that expects good food, nice cars, pretty clothes, and trips to the theatre as its right. Both perspectives are, to those who have been broken in Chechnya, a silly, or possibly sick, lie, and the people who believe in them are not just lightminded sheep, but actively dangerous to those who do know the truth: after all, these lightminded sheep are the ones who vote, while the soldiers themselves are serving on the front and unable to reach a ballot box.

The writers about the Chechen conflicts position themselves as witnesses to something that the rest of the world wishes to ignore, and try to shout as loudly about it as possible, sometimes with success, albeit at the expense of their homes (Babchenko) or their lives (Politkovskaia). They are primarily concerned with telling *the* truth, which tends to turn into *their* truth, as they attempt to convey the multifaceted story of the Chechen conflicts, where there were no clear-cut lines between the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys,’ or on the Chechen side, between combatants and non-combatants. The result is often fragmented, non-linear, highly emotional literature that dwells on the protagonist’s experiences of fear and psychic disintegration, as mapped out in the works’ structure and described in its contents. These works, of which *One Soldier’s War* is a prominent but by no means isolated example, attempt simultaneously to reach out to the reader and convey what the war was like, while drawing a line between the reader and the author declaring that the former will never be able to understand it.

This approach-avoidance dance between reader and author, along with intensely rendered inner states designed to elicit shock and sympathy in equal measure, is characteristic of the new war writing coming out of these new wars. Conflicts which are increasingly being fought by a ‘samurai class’ that feels cut off from the society it supposedly serves, and seeks to create a connection where it can - whether by reaching out to civilians who cannot, it is claimed, understand, or to imagine itself in the hearts of the enemy, who may seem to have more in common with the warriors on the other side than the civilians they are protecting

back home. Both the conflicts abroad and the problems they have revealed at home remain largely unresolved, putting readers, even those who supposedly can never understand, squarely in the middle of the issues these authors raise. How it will turn out has yet to be decided.

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