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Russia

Protests by Soldiers' Wives in Russia Show How an Antiwar Movement Can Grow There

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In Russia, the wives of men mobilized to the Ukrainian front are increasingly demanding that they be returned home. While the movement is not mainly directed at opposing Vladimir Putin, it offers hope of breaking the war machine from within.

In fall 2022, Russia began a partial mobilization of civilians for the war in Ukraine. By October 2023, at least four thousand of them had been killed (Russia's total nonrecoverable losses amount to four hundred thousand men, but these are mostly contract soldiers who were killed or heavily wounded). Striking, among the mobilized dead, is the number of over-forties, since young men are more likely to avoid the draft. Many of these men were sent to the front despite deferrals for health reasons or work. They were promised that they would mainly serve in the rear — but in fact they were thrown into the most dangerous parts of the front, often without training and with poor equipment.

While the mobilization lasted a month, there was no official decree to end it, so the mobilized men are forced to stay at the front. At first, the authorities promised to replace them with contractors, but now openly state that they will have to fight until the "Special Military Operation" (SMO) is over. The mobilized are not allowed leave — after all, it has been estimated that if they were granted this dispensation, most would never return. Ninety-eight percent of the mobilized wounded are later returned to service.

But the relatives of the mobilized are not accepting all this. A growing movement is demanding that they be brought home, moving from attempts at dialogue with local officials and appeals to the president to street actions and mass flash mobs. Their demands include the establishment of a one-year time limit for mobilization, or a complete transition to contractual status. The movement also demands rights to social protest and public assembly, as well as "social justice and equality in rights and duties for everyone, including the mobilized."

Initially, the women participating in the movement tried to reach out to military committees and local officials, who largely ignored them. The first visible public action was participation in the ritual action held by the Communist Party (KPRF) on November 7, anniversary of the October Revolution. Three dozen women brought placards reading "Bring back our husbands." They were instantly surrounded by police, and the KPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov promised that he would help with the return of the mobilized men. No such help was forthcoming.

This action in fact resulted from an appeal by a deputy in the State Duma (parliament), who called on Muscovites to attend the rally with the words: "Some go to the front to defend the Motherland, while others continue to shamelessly trade in the riches of our land and reap huge profits." This offers a typical taste of today's KPRF rhetoric — support for the war, added to the desire to attribute its negative outcomes to some unspecified group of "oligarchs and liberals." The activists wryly remarked: "We thought it was an invitation to visit, and we came." This is an alarming signal for the prowar left and all the controlled parties: the further any call for political participation reaches, the more likely it is to lead to uncomfortable demands related to the effects of the war.

Since this incident, women participants in the movement have tried in vain to coordinate their own rallies in several cities. Officials opposed this, including under the absurd pretext of the COVID threat. (Progovernment and prowar rallies, organized from above, take place without similar restrictions). The maximum that the authorities did allow was an indoor rally, to which only the wives of mobilized men were allowed, and all visible agitation was tightly controlled.

More of a success was the flash mob. "Bring back my husband. I'm fucking tired" — stickers with these words were pasted by women on the rear windows of their cars. The number of women involved in the movement is rising, and they are drawing attention to their demands by attending the actions of pro-Kremlin movements in Moscow, laying

flowers at monuments to patriotic heroes, and trying hundreds of letters and calls to Putin's "Direct Line" phone-in show.

Initially, the presidential administration recommended that regional officials "extinguish with money" the protest of the mobilized men's wives. At the same time, law enforcers started coming to activists' homes and blocking their social media. TV propagandists and progovernment Telegram channels accuse these women of working for the "West" and Ukraine. As a result of the mass complaints, the main and most radical mouthpiece of the movement, the "Way Home" Telegram channel, was labeled "fake." Putin's staff created the "Katyusha" movement, whose participants pretend to be wives of the mobilized and mouth government-loyalist positions. Such displays, as well as the creation of various pseudoprotest formations, are an established technique of Kremlin apparatchiks. Putin's meetings with representatives of "ordinary people" are often attended by the same figures (probably from the security forces) who pose as soldiers, fishermen, or laborers.

The solution to the problem of the mobilized men's relatives has been handed down to regional authorities. Moscow can thus blame local leaders for measures that are too harsh or that prove unsuccessful. The main concern: to prevent the protesters from uniting at the national level.

“Attacked From Both Sides”

The relatives of the mobilized men complain of resentment from both jingoist Russian patriots and the most radical oppositionists. These latter criticize the women for not speaking out in support of Ukraine and failing to directly demand that the war stop; the husbands are accused of agreeing to their own mobilization.

The demands to return the mobilized initially caused tension also among Russians who feared another wave of mobilization. So, the movement eventually abandoned the demand for more rotation of men in favor of a complete rejection of mobilization.

The mobilized, like contract workers, receive 200,000 rubles a month — a large amount especially by provincial standards, and around triple the average salary. They also get benefits like free child transport or exemption from kindergarten fees. This is also a factor for tension. Some of their "patriotically" minded or poverty-stricken fellow citizens are dissatisfied that the relatives who receive such state assistance are also voicing discontent.

Yet activists explain that most of the payments are themselves spent on buying equipment — medicines, bandages, and food for the mobilized. Secondly, we might add, perhaps there is a logic in the fact that a group that has been a relative beneficiary of the war gradually turns out to be politically conscious and militant. Coming into contact with the state, with its insolent officials and lying spokesmen, in the name of receiving its benefits, this group is filled with a kind of moral resentment that has been the fuel for revolts and revolutions for centuries.

Another good cause for resentment is the fact that prisoners, including those convicted of serious crimes, who sign the contract (six to eighteen months) remain at liberty after their military service ends, and often commit new crimes, while civilians who are mobilized are doomed to serve until the SMO is over.

In general, the bet that — against the backdrop of poverty, especially in the regions — payments and benefits will prove decisive for successful recruitment is entirely consistent with the cynical neoliberal-paternalistic logic inherent in the Russian government. This logic is one of the pillars for the "military-Keynesian" project that analysts have been discussing lately — essentially an updated and radicalized version of the "welfare in exchange for loyalty" deal, which

dates back to the first decade of Putin's rule. This time, the authorities are trying to buy not only the loyalty of citizens, but also the frontline presence, health, and lives of hundreds of thousands of men. The deal is framed as a preaching of patriotism and family values, but it threatens to generate counterversions of both, in a new round of politicization.

Patriotism, Family, Love

This takes many forms. "There was a split between the wives involved in chats, dividing them into three groups," says one activist. "One group was the 'fierce' girls who said, 'Our boys are good, let them go ahead, I'll bear with it,' while they themselves are constantly asking about money. The second group — and I belonged to it — is 'neutral': we support our husbands and do not meddle. And the third says — 'let's bring our husbands home.' Now I'm leaning more toward the third group, because enough is enough."

The wives' persistence and self-organization belie myths about the passivity and almost "slave-like character" of the Russian population. Much emotional energy has been invested in spreading this myth over the past two years, including by a radically disillusioned part of the opposition public. The movement's successes may not only help debunk this myth, but also provide the ground for a new patriotic emotion that realizes the authorities' fears and refutes skeptics' stereotypes.

The same goes for the ideological theme of the family, increasingly aggressively preached by the authorities, the church, and ultraconservatives. Evidently, there is no greater enemy for the Russian family than war. As some wives put it, the "'year of the family' has been announced. But what family? You have destroyed thousands of families. What kind of family can we talk about?" The wives of the mobilized complain, among other things, about the psychological trauma of young children growing up without fathers, who stop talking and experience other developmental problems. It is increasingly clear that women's struggle for their husbands' return from the front is an adherence to "family values" in their reasonable, not twisted conservative version.

Political scientist Tatiana Stanovaya considers it emblematic that Putin was recently "asked" to run for president again in 2024 by people whose sons had died in the war.

This will be used as a response to the protest of wives and mothers of the mobilized. The Kremlin is showing society that there are two types of behavior: true patriots who are willing to give up their most precious things for the sake of the homeland, and [those who] don't understand what the country is fighting for and how important it is for everyone to stick together . . .

Fertility is another fetish of the government, which sends young men to war and exports them abroad, thus widening the negative demographic gap, and tries to compensate for it by promoting traditional values and banning abortion. "I am ready to raise your fertility rate if you give me my husband back," the activist replies.

"Yesterday he called me, it was the first time I heard him cry." Like all protracted wars, the SMO in Ukraine threatens the dominant canon of masculinity. In a society shaped by neoliberal ideology and authoritarian pressures, notions of civic valor are devalued in the extreme. Work and other socially useful activities are perceived strictly as an element of private life and the individual's career.

What instead predominates is the archaic notion that war is the only sphere where a man can prove himself as a

citizen-patriot. To be a real man, he should be ready to uncomplainingly fulfill his duty and go to war, even without fully understanding its meaning. One of the main reasons many men did not evade mobilization was that they were "ashamed to run away from the military commissar." These women are trying to bring them home — at the same time generating a model of citizenship in which saving loved ones and fighting for life is not contrary to the interests of society and the country, but fully in line with them:

I am not only for my son, I am for all the guys who were mobilized. And they are simply being destroyed there, so that they do not come back, so that they don't bring their negativity toward the authorities back with them. My husband said to me: "Do you think that if they start pressing you, we won't turn around and go [to Moscow], like Prigozhin did in his time? We will go."

Finally, there is love. Officials believe that "in war wives often wait not for their husbands, but for their wage cards." It seems that in a society demoralized by poverty, there is good reason for such a cynical view. But the activists believe otherwise: "They try to shut us up with payments and benefits. But when it comes to the cost of a loved one's life, you want to tear up the person who dares to make such a nasty offer," the women respond. "No money can replace a loving husband for a loving wife and no money can replace a father for a child." "We don't need benefits, we need our boyfriends . . ." "Stop shoving stinking benefits and payments at us instead of returning our loved ones . . ."

In the current system, the women's arguments that they simply love their husbands and so fight for their lives sound like a revelation. Love that turns into a political protest against the rich and powerful ruling and trading our lives is something we are all sorely lacking, not just in Russia.

In turn, the relatives of the mobilized lack international support. Russian propaganda fills the airwaves with narratives about the struggle of state sovereignties and civilizations. It tries to discredit and criminalize the very idea of international solidarity, labeling any expression of it as a sign of interference by foreign forces. But while appeals to Western governments are hardly useful for movements like the relatives of the mobilized, they vitally need the support of women's, antiwar, and trade union initiatives that can give their struggles an international dimension. The relatives of the mobilized do themselves point to this international context. They recall how 2.5 million mobilized Americans went to Vietnam (and only over time did the antiwar movement turn some of them around). Or they use the white handkerchief symbol, referring to the movement of Argentine mothers whose children disappeared under 1976–81 dictator Jorge Videla.

From Past to Future

Women's antiwar resistance has a long history in Russia. During World War I women began by asking for the payment or increase of mobilization benefits, but quickly moved to radical actions and anti-government slogans. They took to the streets, broke into administrative buildings, smashed up stores, and tried to hold up rail convoys with mobilized men. As one Russian peasant woman scolded Tsar Nicholas II: "Fuck his mother, he can give my husband back, I don't need his pennies." Against the "war, the high costs and the position of the woman worker," women came out to demonstrate on February 23, giving rise to the Russian Revolution.

In the 1990s, Committee of Soldiers' Mothers demanded an immediate halt to the war in Chechnya and the withdrawal of troops from the republic. They successfully negotiated with Chechen commanders for the extradition of prisoners, organized the Grozny-Moscow antiwar march, sought the release of deserters from criminal responsibility, and collected humanitarian aid for the peaceful population of the Chechen Republic. They again played a key role in

the peace process.

The specter of women's self-organization looms over today's Russia, too. "As Grandpa Lenin said, 'every cook must learn to govern the state,'" the hosts of the Way Home group remind us. This is not just an amusing turn of phrase, or a ritual reference to the leader of the most successful antiwar project in Russian history. It is a direct challenge to a stereotype that, according to sociologists, is ingrained in many Russians' thinking: "even if we don't understand why the war started, the people at the top surely know it, otherwise they wouldn't have started it."

But there is no secret knowledge that gives elites the right and reason to start wars. The only "secret" revealed by an effective antiwar movement is whose interests lie behind the current war. The movement of relatives of the mobilized proves that, contrary to propaganda, activism is not a virus introduced by some external enemy and can be wiped out by repression. No — it is something that matures and self-organizes within society, passing through different stages of awareness.

The previous version of the movement for the return of the mobilized emerged in 2022 and was called the "Committee of Mothers and Wives." Representatives of the "Citizens of the USSR" movement and fighters against the Jewish religious movement Chabad played some role in it (alas, antisemitic conspiracy has always played a role in the post-Soviet red-brown opposition). This element allowed the authorities to marginalize the organization quite easily. The movement we see today declares its pluralism (including different opinions on the SMO) in its ranks, focusing on the demand for demobilization and the right to free speech — tactically, an absolutely correct move. What happens next will largely depend on the willingness of the Left and democratic forces to engage in respectful dialogue and solidarity.

On December 14, Putin staged another "Direct Line," referring to the war. As the Way Home channel comments: "Everyone was waiting for some word about the mobilized. Some had hopes. Some didn't. This is just another knife in the back. Another brazen betrayal." The president called Ukrainian Odessa a "Russian city," signaling his willingness to continue the war and occupy new territories — at the cost of a huge number of lives, of course. According to the latest poll, 48 percent of Russians support the demobilization demand, while 32 percent oppose it. No matter how long the war lasts and no matter what happens to the current "relatives of the mobilized" movement, any serious, mass anti-Putinist project will develop along the paths that these women are today treading.

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Source: [Jacobin](#).

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