Saving Private Sychev: 
Russian Masculinities, Army Hazing, 
and Social Norms

Anna U. Lowry*

Abstract:

This paper examines the recent case of Andrei Sychev, a former soldier in the Russian army who lost his legs and genitals as a result of a violent hazing. Reviewing extensive media coverage of and debate over the significance of this incident, the author identifies the debate's main participants, including military officials, politicians, members of the Soldiers' Mothers movement, and medical experts. An analysis of their discourses (nationalist, liberal, medical-scientific) and premises, informed by Foucauldian theory and masculinity studies, is presented, revealing important discrepancies and occasionally surprising overlap among their interpretations of the incident. Ultimately, the paper seeks to understand the Sychev affair as a discursive knot in which conflicting notions of Russian masculinity and norms of citizenship are tied together. It concludes with a reflection on the challenges that the human rights group Soldiers' Mothers face in their struggle to redefine the dominant norms.

On New Year's Eve 2006, Russia's biggest holiday, a terrible hazing incident happened in the Chelyabinsk Military School. At the height of the festivities, when officers and soldiers alike were heavily intoxicated, senior soldiers in one unit decided to demonstrate their superiority over eight newcomers with a humiliating hazing ritual. Among those new to the unit was nineteen-year old Andrei Sychev. For several hours, he was beaten, tied between the two chairs, and made to squat. On January 4, Sychev could not come out to formation and had to be hospitalized (Izotov 2006a). By that time, it was already too late to save the entire lower half of his body, as he was diagnosed with gangrene of the legs, fingers, and genitals, all of which were subsequently amputated.

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Sarah Phillips and Gardner Bovingdon for their insightful comments and support. I am also grateful to Beth Holmgren, Adele Lindenmeyr, and Michele Rivkin-Fish of the AWSS Graduate Essay Prize Committee for their recognition.
If not for this horrifying story, this disgrace in the Chelyabinsk military division would most likely have remained a military secret, as has happened with so many other cases of hazing in the Russian army (Gul’ko 2006). Even in this case, it took twenty-five days for the central media to make the incident public. The military’s initial reaction was apparently to hush it up and to save the already tarnished honor of the uniform. The scandal was revealed unexpectedly on January 25 with an official announcement by the Office of the Military Prosecutor. For more than a week Sychev was the main feature on all Russian news channels. In an attempt to amend the situation, President Putin gave Sychev an apartment (Gul’ko 2006). Additionally, the deputies of the State Duma promised that Sychev would be receiving a lifetime allowance. Central TV channels provided play-by-play coverage of Sychev’s life: “Private Andrei Sychev is getting better.” “Private Sychev asked for water.” “Doctors think Sychev’s condition is stabilizing.” “Chelyabinsk administration allocated five hundred thousand rubles for Sychev’s treatment” (Gul’ko 2006).

The Sychev incident was a blatant act of violence. However, it was not unique or unprecedented in the context of the Russian army. What makes this incident different from other cases of hazing is its wide social and political resonance. For the first time in Russian history, the fate of a victim of hazing had become a topic of national news and a subject of intense public debate. Public opinion in Russia blamed the current administration for tolerating the practice of dedovshchina, an organized system of hazing in the Russian army, and demanded that the Defense Ministry finally deal with a problem it had been ignoring for years. As Steven Lee Myers (2006) aptly put it, “...[t]he case of Private Sychev has shaken the Russian military like no other scandal since the sinking of the nuclear submarine Kursk in 2000.”

It is tempting to interpret this public campaign against hazing as a victory for human rights groups, perhaps even an indicator of a strengthening civil society. A closer examination of the debate, however, reveals a more complex picture. In the Sychev incident, the resurgence of the liberal discourse on soldiers’ human rights coincides with, and often is overpowered by, the nationalist discourse which deflects from military officials the responsibility for violating the rights of soldiers. While the liberal discourse frames the incident as political genocide, in the sense of the increasing “invalidization” (Deputat 2006) of soldiers returning from

---

1 The State Duma is the lower house of the Federal Assembly, the parliament of the Russian Federation.

2 According to the Defense Ministry, 16 soldiers were killed as a result of hazing incidents in 2005, the year before the Sychev scandal erupted. Human rights activists claim that the figure is much higher if soldiers driven to suicide by hazing are included. 276 soldiers killed themselves last year, according to the Defense Ministry (Finn 2006a).
military service\(^3\), the nationalist discourse sees *dedovshchina* as an unquestionable constituent part of the military service. The author argues that these divergent interpretations of the Sychev case stem from the distance of their proponents in the political spectrum and reflect current Russian ideological struggles over norms of citizenship and masculinity.

This paper uses discourse analysis to evaluate Russian media reports on the Sychev incident and *dedovshchina* in the army. Following Foucault (1977b; 1991) and Peter Schöttler (as outlined in Dölling et al. 2000), the term discourse is used to mean an institutionalized societal manner of speaking with “built-in power and resistance effects” (Dölling et al. 2000: 123). Participants in the discourse, or the narrative, who diverge in their ideological and political positions, can challenge each other “…by taking different discursive positions on the field of the same system of collective symbols that constitute a culture” (Dölling et al. 2000: 123).

To reconstruct the public debate following the Sychev incident, the articles which mentioned Andrei Sychev were selected from the Universal Database of Russian Newspapers (UDRN) and reports from the Russian federal information agency, www.regnum.ru. Following the identification of the participants, their arguments and statuses in the debate, the main discourses and their political and ideological uses were analyzed. The ultimate objective was to identify the different themes that are linked together and to demonstrate how – by locating them in various discourses – they are used to interpret social reality.\(^4\) In particular, the author sought to understand the Sychev affair as a discursive knot, in which conflicting notions of Russian masculinity and norms of citizenship are tied together. The image of a discursive knot suggests entanglement while also distinction across these discourses. Different themes are entangled in the debate surrounding the Sychev incident, but each remains distinct as an individual rope entangled among others. The discourses are knotted in the sense that the Sychev scandal links them together. They are intrinsically distinct because they have unique histories and are employed by actors with divergent ideological and political positions.

Diagram 1, which can be found in Appendix A, situates the different discursive constructions of the Sychev scandal within the nationalist and liberal discourses and identifies their political and ideological uses. The nationalist discourse frames the Sychev incident as

---

\(^3\) In this interpretation, the soldier is a victim of violence sanctioned by the state, which effectively becomes a perpetrator of this “genocide.”

\(^4\) This approach is largely modeled on Dölling et al. 2000 analysis of the media coverage of the so-called “birth strike,” or the “sterilization scandal,” in the unified Germany in May 1992. Their work was a major inspiration for this project.
an outlier that symbolizes the disgrace of the nation. By contrast, the liberal discourse sees the incident as one of many similar cases, articulating the theme of the “invalidization” of young people by the army. These divergent interpretations of the Sychev incident stem from the different norms embedded in each discourse and serve opposite political purposes.

In the nationalist discourse, citizenship is defined by the individual’s contribution to the collective’s “common good,” in the form of military service. Military service functions as a criterion of one’s loyalty to the state, thus constructing a differential structure of citizenship. Military service also becomes a major initiation rite into normative masculinity, that of a combat soldier, which attains a hegemonic status of a social ideal (Sasson-Levy 2003: 323). Hence, a victim of hazing in the nationalist discourse is an outlier, a second grade citizen, who did not pass the initiation rite and who does not conform to the dominant masculinity.

By contrast, the liberal discourse takes equal civic, political, and social rights as a starting point, irrespective of the military service. It resists a unified militarized masculinity that abstracts from real individuals. A victim of hazing, in this discourse, is the one whose rights are routinely violated because he does not conform to hegemonic masculinity. Whereas the nationalist discourse views hazing victims as cowards, the liberal discourse frames these same victims as heroes.

The military officials and conservative politicians employed a nationalist discourse to downplay the Sychev incident and preserve the status quo. This is in contrast with human rights groups such as Soldiers’ Mothers, which used the publicity of the Sychev incident to advocate a reform of the armed forces. They argued for the abolition of general compulsory military service and requested the establishment of a professional military in its stead.

This article begins with the details of the Sychev scandal and an outline of the political reasons for its publicity. The next section provides a list of participants in media discussions of the scandal. This is followed by an interpretive analysis of the nationalist and liberal discourses. The article concludes by examining how various participants in the debate diagnose a different social or political ill at a different level (social, political, and individual).
The Sychev Scandal

On January 8, the Chelyabinsk TV company, Eastern Express (Vostochnii Ekspress), received a call from an ambulance surgeon, who told them about a newly-arrived soldier. The station ran a short episode about the private, who was a victim of “relations contrary to regulations” (neustavnie otnosheniya) (Gul’ko 2006). On January 12, local newspapers wrote about the incident; the next day, the information spilled over to the Russian internet (Brutal 2006). On January 13, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFL/RL) devoted an entire program to Sychev. The first details to surface were about the private’s torture experience and the body parts that were later amputated. RFL/RL mentioned Sychev on their station on the 14th, 17th, and 19th of January. It should be noted, however, that few people in Russia listen to Radio Liberty, and although a criminal case had already been opened and six persons had been arrested, by January 25, not a single central newspaper had written a line about the Sychev case; not a single central TV channel reported the incident (Gul’ko 2006).

Then, on January 25, something quite unprecedented happened. Despite its beginning in virtual obscurity, the tragedy of Andrei Sychev came to the forefront of a public debate that raged throughout the country for several months and sparked unsanctioned meetings in his support in at least two cities (Izotov 2006b, Voronov 2006). It was on this day that the Office of the Military Prosecutor placed an official announcement on its website about the investigation of a case of neustavnie otnosheniya in Chelyabinsk Military School. The announcement stressed that the case had been taken under special control by Chief Military Prosecutor Aleksandr Savenkov (Gul’ko 2006).

It should be mentioned that Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov has long had a strained relationship with the Chief Military Prosecutor. At a briefing in May of last year, Savenkov accused the army of “laxity” (raskhlyabannost), which had led to the increase in the number of cases of dedovshchina. On June 6, Ivanov retorted that the crime level in the army was lower than that nation-wide, and that the army investigated most of the stealing-related cases on its own. In this context, the announcement by the Office of the Military Prosecutor can be considered as just another attack on Sergei Ivanov. It is not surprising, then, that Ivanov’s first response to the Sychev case was callous: “I spent the last several days far away from the Russian territory, high in the mountains,

---

5 Director of the Russian service of Radio Liberty Maria Klein estimates the size of their audience in Moscow at 3.5-4% of all radio listeners. Low rating can be explained by the fact that the RFE/RL programs in Russia are relayed on an unpopular AM band and are also unpopular with the Kremlin (Rostova 2005). On July 7, 2006, 60 radio stations stopped broadcasting news reports produced by RFE/RL (Finn 2006b).
and have not heard about what happened in Chelyabinsk. At the same time, I do not think that there is anything serious there; otherwise, I would have known for sure” (Gul’ko 2006). In essence, this was a response to the Office of the Military Prosecutor.

This casual and dismissive response was the minister’s strategic mistake. Virtually every independent media outlet picked up the statement, “I do not think there is anything serious here,” interpreting it as an indication that the amputation of a 19-year-old soldier’s legs and genitals was not a serious case to the Defense Minister. The Kremlin had no choice but to launch a counterattack. The Russian government placed Ivanov at the center of the investigation into the Sychev incident and used the central media in order to help save face for Ivanov.

By the next day, the state TV channels had started broadcasting Sychev’s story. On air, Minister Ivanov promised that nobody would evade punishment, and that those who had withheld information from the higher command for 25 days would bear full responsibility. Chief of Chelyabinsk Military School major-general Victor Sidorov, against whom a criminal investigation had already been opened, was dismissed. The Ministry of Defense declared that punishment of officials for concealing cases of neustavnie otnosheniya and “barrack hooliganism” was to be more severe. Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin, at a press-conference in the Kremlin, told journalists about Sergei Ivanov’s new initiative – the creation of military police (Gul’ko 2006).

**Identifying the Participants**

To reconstruct the media campaign, I evaluated the articles from the period January 1, 2006 to May 31, 2006. During this timeframe, there were 201 articles in the UDRN and 259 reports total on regnum.ru, which mentioned Andrei Sychev. I chose 60 articles from the UDRN and 80 articles from regnum.ru for my analysis.6 Below I identify the principal participants in the debate, their representative claims, and their roles in the narrative structure.

**Military officials: “The tragedy of Sychev is a special case.”**

Military officials were the center of attention in this scandal and were heavily represented throughout the media campaign. Every other article in the UDRN and every third article on regnum.ru included a direct quote from a military official. These were often the target of

---

6 A random selection method was used to select the articles.
criticism. Within the discourse structure, military officials can be classified as protagonists of the nationalist discourse.

Soldiers’ Mothers Movement: “A soldier has fewer rights than a criminal.”

In relation to military officials and other participants in the debate, Soldiers’ Mothers and human rights activists, in general, were among the political opposition. Statistically, their presence in the media campaign was low. One in sixteen articles in the UDRN and one in eighteen articles on regnum.ru quoted Soldiers’ Mothers activists. Soldiers’ Mothers utilized a liberal discourse and invoked an opposition between the state and the individual, stressing the “invalidization” (invalidizatsiya) of young people by the army, their legal vulnerability, and lack of human rights.

Politicians: “We have to reestablish everything as it used to be.”

Politicians were also highly vocal in the debate. One in five articles in the UDRN and one in six articles on regnum.ru included a direct quote from a politician. Politicians involved in the debate were comprised of State Duma deputies, including members of Putin’s United Russia, members of liberal parties – Yabloko, the Republican Party of Russia (RPR) and the Union of Right Forces (SPS), and regional governors. Politicians in the ruling party were under pressure to deal swiftly with the crisis. They needed to make the impression that dedovshchina was less of a problem in the old days and that strengthening army discipline should help in the current situation. This preserved the image of national unity and struck a cord with the patriotic audience. With respect to the Sychev incident, these politicians shared the view that the media had blown it out of proportion (Chitinskii 2006). Liberal politicians, by contrast, argued that the perpetrator’s sentence was too mild and that the measures taken to address dedovshchina in the army were ineffective as a whole (“Yabloko” 2006). Members of Yabloko and the Soldiers’ Mothers spoke in one voice about the “lack of a tradition and politics of human rights” (“Yabloko” 2006) in Russia. Others – like the RPR – called for an act of civil disobedience and demanded the resignation of the Minister of Defense Sergey Ivanov (Vo vremya 2006).

Experts: “Intellectuals in the army are the object of mockery.”

The presence of experts, notably psychologists, counselors, and government-employed authorities on the military was moderate but increased over time. On the one hand, they saw the reasons for dedovshchina in the nature of the military training itself, since a major part of the training focuses on the development of aggressiveness. For
this reason, they proposed getting rid of the extraterritorial principle\(^7\) of manning the Armed Forces. According to the specialists on the military, introducing an alternative – territorial – principle that would allow soldiers to return home, to the family, would mitigate aggressiveness in the army. On the other hand, they also looked for the causes of dedovshchina at the individual level, arguing that “soldier-intellectuals in the army are useless” (Prezident 2006). Finally, experts on the military stressed the need for creating new armed forces on a more equal and professional basis and eliminating the present “peasant-worker” army. The fact is that with the present conditions in the army, only those without any money or connections, who cannot buy themselves out of military service, are enlisted. Hence, an argument based on restoring “social justice” was embraced by both experts and politicians in this debate.

**Military doctors: “Sychev was doomed.”**

One in five articles in the UDRN and one in nine articles on regnum.ru included a direct quote from a doctor. Military doctors who treated Sychev take an ambiguous position in this story. Early on, the emphasis is on the torture and beatings as a direct precursor to Sychev’s gangrene. The final diagnosis, however, is thrombophilia, which is a genetic disease associated with an increased propensity to form blood clots. The authoritative interpretation, hence, is that the army was only a triggering mechanism, which set Sychev’s illness in motion. Conveniently for military officials, the responsibility is placed on the individual, and the army is spared the blame.

**Sychev’s family: “I am losing my son piece by piece.”**

Sychev’s mother and sister are present throughout his treatment. Their statements appear in every fifth article in the UDRN and every ninth article on regnum.ru and make the Sychev incident a highly emotional issue. Ironically, though, the statements by the mother with regard to the financial support the family is receiving from the military serve as a kind of positive PR for military officials. At the same time, linking this particular case of dedovshchina with its effects on individual families can be regarded as a certain victory for the Soldiers’ Mothers movement, who have been the most vocal protagonists of this type of discourse.

---

\(^7\) Under this system, conscripts are sent to serve in units stationed outside their home districts or regions. By contrast, the territorial principle allows soldiers to return home, to the family, at night or on weekends.
Soldiers and recruits

Soldiers and recruits themselves were hardly present in this debate. While the Sychev affair was debated all over the country, Andrei himself for months was in no condition to be interviewed by media reporters. His mother and sister, in a sense, became his voice throughout the treatment. There were virtually no direct quotes by him in the media. One exception was his brief comments, retold by his family, about “educational conversations” (“vospitatel’nie besedi”) to which he had been taken by the elder soldiers. Though Andrei never elaborated on the details, it is clear that he was referring to an act of hazing. Later on, he refused to talk about what happened altogether. It should be noted that this silence is not unique to Andrei. Victims of hazing often withhold the information about their tortures out of fear of revenge or out of fear to admit one’s own weakness. They also do not want to be seen as informers and offenders of group solidarity. The latter also explains the silence of bystanders. Finally, in dedovshchina, there are often elements the disclosure of which damages self-esteem of a man (Igor’ 2006). Although the Sychev incident was followed by the coverage of an increasing number of cases of dedovshchina in the media, the voices of the soldiers themselves – victims, perpetrators, bystanders – are rarely heard.

Articulating the Conflicting Notions of Citizenship and Masculinity

In order to understand the Sychev incident as a discursive knot, it is necessary to examine how the conflicting notions of citizenship and masculinity are tied in its interpretation. In this section, the divergent norms of citizenship and masculinity are analyzed in the context of the ideological and political conflict between the proponents of the nationalist and liberal discourses. The summaries of each discourse in general as well as the affiliated positions in the Sychev scandal debate are presented below.

The Nationalist Discourse

The nationalistic discourse generally articulates a theme of the “common good” of the community. Historically, this “common good” has been understood in “security” terms, fusing military service and participatory citizenship. Citizenship is defined by the individual’s contribution to the collective’s “common good.” This contribution is manifested through military service, which serves as a major criterion for one’s loyalty to the state and one’s patriotism (Sasson-Levy 2003: 321). The nationalistic discourse thus constructs a differential structure of citizenship: men who serve in the army are endowed with benefits and
advantages while women and others who do not serve are constituted as “second grade” citizens.

Within the nationalist discourse, military service is also closely linked to masculinity. Militaries play a major role in the construction of masculine identities and affect images of masculinity in the larger society. Up to this day, the warrior remains a hegemonic symbol of masculinity. (Connell 2002) In Western philosophical tradition, individuality, selfhood, autonomy, the concern with “universal” moral principles, and the transcending of “private” interests lie at the heart of hegemonic masculinity and are intimately connected with war-making and citizenship (Sasson-Levy 2003: 322). As Joan Nagel (1998: 251) points out, “[t]hemes like honor, patriotism, cowardice, bravery and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist since they seem so thoroughly tied both to the nation and manliness.” In Russia, the association between national and masculine values has a long history. It dates back at least to the 1920s and is related to the development of a “militarized socialism” characterized by “a bellicist world view and the predominance of national security values and military interests in the economic and cultural life of the country” (von Hagen 1990: 331).

In the debate on the Sychev incident, the nationalist discourse is articulated by military officials as well as some members of the ruling party. The dominant line of argument links the disgrace of the Chelyabinsk military division to the disgrace of the nation. Dedovshchina is seen as a symptom of the ailing nation, a symbol of a society in sickness. A quote from the speech of the Minister of Defense Sergey Ivanov to the Russian parliament captures this association. Citing the statistics that speak to the problems related to the condition of draftees (suicide rate, drug and alcohol use, health problems, etc.), Ivanov said:

Given that 200 thousand people are drafted to the Armed Forces every year, the figures that I cited speak not so much to the condition of the army as to the condition of the nation as a whole. Let’s talk straight. In a physical and spiritually-moral sense, it is impossible to speak about our society as a healthy body; it has to be treated. (Vistuplenie 2006)

The patriotic rhetoric invoked by Ivanov shifts the focus of attention from the violation of rights of the members of the armed forces and the culpability of military institutions to an abstract notion of an ailing nation. At the same time, the vitality of the nation is conceptually linked to the honor of the uniform. The implication is that the nation’s vitality can only be preserved by reclaiming the honor of a soldier and defending the hegemonic masculinity of a warrior.

In other statements, military officials either tried to deny the existence of hazing or presented it as exceptional. The Chief of Staff of
the Russian Armed Forces, General Yury Baluyevsky, and the Military Prosecutor Alexander Savenkov were the first officials to comment on the incident in the Chelyabinsk region. Baluyevsky expressed his indignation about the incident. "It was outrageous that no one in the military command was aware of the situation in the military unit," the general said (Brutal 2006). Alexander Savenkov took the investigation of the incident under his personal control. "I have never seen such a cynical and blatant crime during twenty years of my service," he said (Brutal 2006). In the same vein, the military commissar of Sverdlovsk oblast Alexandr Kudryavtsev called the tragedy of private Sychev a "special case" (chasnii sluchai) (Voenkom 2006). According to him, most of the drafted soldiers live without incidents. On a more radical note, the commander-in-chief of land forces Aleksei Maslov declared that there was no mockery of private Sychev by older soldiers. He also claimed that there was no evidence of massive intoxication among the soldiers of the battalion on New Year's Eve (Voenkom 2006).

This denial of the hazing incident and the unwillingness to consider it in relation to numerous other cases of hazing signifies military officials' tacit acceptance of the practice of dedovshchina in the army. Many of them treat dedovshchina as part of a warrior's training. The reasoning goes as follows: what kind of a warrior is he if he cannot take pain? If an elder soldier could beat him up, then an enemy can beat him up too. That is why he has to be reared/educated (ego nado vospitivat'), and tough conditions should be created for zakalka, i.e. "tempering oneself." The position is basically: "He who survives is a good soldier" (Altaiiskii 2006). The corollary is that a victim of hazing is a weakling who did not pass the initiation rite into hegemonic masculinity.

In addition to having articulated a hegemonic masculinity, the nationalist discourse employed by military officials invoked a differential structure of citizenship. The following comment regarding a controversial bill canceling nine out of the twenty-five total grounds for deferral from military service can serve as an example. The revoked grounds for deferral specifically exempted rural teachers, young fathers, and young men taking care of parents-pensioners (Litovkin 2006). Explaining the rationale for canceling the deferrals, a military official argued: "I do not understand why we should exempt people from the military duty based on these principles...For example, rural teachers. It is wrong when a person who did not serve in the army teaches children who will later serve." This official sees military service as a major indicator of one's loyalty to the state. Rural teachers exempted from military service are viewed as undeserving of the same rights as former soldiers and are implicitly considered "second grade" citizens.

---

8 Oblast is one of the types of administrative divisions of Russia.
Charges that certain individuals did not serve in the army were common in the Sychev scandal debate. Opponents of Ivanov tried to discredit him through such accusations, and Soldiers’ Mothers were attacked by attempts to show that their sons had not served (Radzikhovskii 2006, Kolesnichenko 2006). Women in this context are assessed not based on their own merit but rather on whether their sons served in the military. Citizenship in this case is once again identified with military service. Women are not considered to be men’s equal partners in their loyalty to the state and are not entitled to the same rights as men. An example of such a discursive construction of a differentiated and hierarchical citizenship is given by Aleksandr Sharavin, a director of the Institute of Military-political Analysis: “Everyone has to serve in the army... A person who has not served in the army does not have a right to free higher education and does not have a right to occupy administrative positions” (Sharavin 2005).

While women in general are discursively marginalized, Soldiers’ Mothers are perceived as the “other.” On a Russian website of political commentaries, Leonid Radzikhovskiy (2006) raises the question of who is “ours” and who is “theirs” for an ordinary Russian citizen in this debate. He puts it this way: On the one hand, there is a native state that protects us from enemies; on the other, “a foreign consultant, professor, and spy,” masked as a “God’s elderly woman” (bozh’ya starushka). In this nationalist discourse, Soldiers’ Mothers and other human rights activists are all lumped under the category of “the other,” “agents of the West,” enemies of Russia, “whose sons did not serve in the Russian army” and who spend their time “digging out the facts of humiliation of our soldiers,” “make noise,” and dampen the image of Russia in the world.

The political purpose of this type of nationalist discourse is to preserve the status quo and to ensure political legitimacy for the current administration. A related concern at the time was to prevent the disruption of the spring drafting period and to restore discipline in the military divisions (Ministr 2006). To ensure these goals, state-controlled media spun the Sychev incident as positive PR. It was intended to show the concern the higher command had for the fate of Sychev and the measures they were taking to address the current situation in the army.

In sum, national discourse, articulated in the debate mainly by military officials, symbolically links the disgrace in the Chelyabinsk military division to the disgrace of the nation. As national values are emphasized, the focus of the debate shifts away from the violation of

---

9 Conscription of young men (18 to 27 years old) in Russia is carried out in two drafting periods per year, in the spring (from April 1 to July 15) and in the fall (from October 1 to December 31) (Sluzhba 2008).
rights of soldiers. Victims of hazing and those who are exempted from military service are implicitly constructed as “second grade” citizens who do not conform to the hegemonic masculinity of a combat soldier. Soldiers’ Mothers, who defend the rights of victims of *dedovshchina*, are perceived in oppositional categories, as the “other.” The political purpose of this discourse is to ensure political legitimacy for the current administration and to discredit those who get in the way.

*The Liberal Discourse*

Liberalism stresses individual rights and equality of opportunity. According to liberalism, civil rights are extended to all citizens equally by law (Oxford Manifesto 1947). The emphasis on individual rights, the rule of law and a transparent system of government allows one to categorize Russia’s Soldiers’ Mothers as the protagonists of a liberal discourse. The violation of rights of the members of the armed forces in the Russian military constitutes their subject of engagement.

Violations of soldiers’ rights were a taboo subject during the Soviet era. It was untouched for a long time even by perestroika*¹⁰* and glasnost*¹¹* and became a subject of public debate only relatively recently. The Soldiers’ Mothers movement has played a major role in exposing criminal actions within the Russian armed forces and bringing them to the forefront of public discussion. The movement was initiated in the early 1990s by relatives of the soldiers who died after being subjected to violence in the armed forces. They began to establish representative interest groups with the goal of protecting the rights of those liable for military duty, of soldiers and their families. The Moscow Committee of Russian Soldiers’ Mothers was the first such organization (Hinterhuber 2001). At present there are about 300 regional groups of Soldiers’ Mothers, which comprise the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia. Among the activities of the organization are informing Russian citizens on the rule of law in relation to service in the armed forces and educating the public about what the military should look like in a democratic society. Soldiers’ Mothers also provide free legal advice to soldiers and their families about their rights and conscription laws and intervene on behalf of soldiers who are facing abuse and hazing.

Soldiers’ Mothers’ ideological and political position is similar to Russia’s leading liberal party Yabloko, which stands for greater freedom

---

¹⁰ Perestroika (literally, “restructuring”) refers to the economic reforms introduced in June 1987 by the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.
¹¹ Glasnost is the policy of openness and transparency in the activities of all government institutions in the Soviet Union, as well as freedom of information, introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev.
and civil liberties in Russia, greater integration with the West and an end to the Second Chechen War (Programma 2006). Within the discourse structure, Soldiers’ Mothers and Yabloko occupy a counter-position to military officials. This is evident in their opposition to the war in Chechnya and their emphasis on the control of the institutions of the state, in particular, the control of the armed forces. Such a stance is viewed as unpatriotic by the proponents of the nationalist discourse.

The liberal discourse articulated by Soldiers’ Mothers presents a challenge to the nationalist notions of citizenship and masculinity. By resisting military discipline and authority and stressing the role of the provider over the role of soldier, Soldiers’ Mothers challenge the nationalist “principle of contribution” as a determinant of one’s belonging to the collective. The individual and his personal fate are brought to the forefront and the attention is drawn to his status as a victim. Soldiers’ Mothers emphasize the local, physical, and social context of the subject. This is achieved through the strategies of personalization and familialization. Texts describing specific individuals, e.g. victims of hazing, deserters, etc., are published and their sufferings are brought out of their anonymity into the open. The individual soldier or recruit is found in his immediate social environment – his family, which draws attention to a different aspect of his personality and breaks the seeming social isolation of the soldier (Hinterhuber 2001). In this respect, Soldiers’ Mothers articulate a counter-hegemonic conception of masculinity. When Soldiers’ Mothers mention soldiers’ home and family as a major factor in their lives, they describe a “home based masculinity” (Sasson-Levy 2003). Such masculine identities stress responsibility and contribution, but their responsibility is to the family rather than to the nation or the state.

When the Sychev scandal broke, the Soldiers’ Mothers, while suspicious of its unusual publicity, used the opportunity to draw public attention to numerous other cases of dedovshchina and desertion. Unlike military officials who claimed that the Sychev incident was a special case, Soldiers’ Mothers argued that dedovshchina in the Russian army is pervasive and, in fact, a “norm of its being, true essence and rule” (Voronov 2006). The chair of the Soldiers’ Mothers in Kostroma, Nina Terekhova, claimed that dedovshchina “blooms” in 80 percent of military divisions. Interestingly, the figures given by military officials were the exact opposite. The Military Prosecutor and Minister of Defense both argued that in 80% of military divisions there is no dedovshchina (Litovkin 2006b; Shenderovich 2005).

Following the Chelyabinsk incident, Yabloko and the interregional social organization Soldiers’ Mothers issued a joint declaration which stressed that the case of dedovshchina in Chelyabinsk
speaks about the lack in Russia of a tradition and politics of human rights. They criticized the notion of an omnipotent state that exists above an unprotected individual and argued that instead the state should create conditions for individual self-realization. Soldiers’ Mothers emphasized the legal vulnerability of a soldier and his lack of human rights and talked about the “invalidization” of young people by the army. One of the most critical comments came from a chair of a regional branch of the Soldiers’ Mothers movement, deputy of Komi parliament Lyudmila Zav’yalova: “The army is an institution with the help of which the state carries out political genocide against its people” (Deputat 2006).

The emphasis on the local, physical, and social context of the subject in the Sychev incident debate can be seen as a success for Soldiers Mothers. Media reports provided details of Sychev’s family life, including that he went to the army willingly, that he was the only man in a family where his father had died, and his mother was left with three daughters and a son. Sychev’s home based masculinity is constructed in opposition to the hegemonic masculinity of a soldier. While the liberal discourse seems to be less prevalent in the media than the nationalist discourse, the ability to direct people’s attention to the immediate social environment of the individual and to politicize the local constitutes a certain victory for Soldiers’ Mothers. It also allows them to “question the existence and validity of extra-local and extra-personal constructs” (Hinterhuber 2001).

The immediate political goal of the liberal discourse, articulated in the debate by Soldiers’ Mothers, is reform of the armed forces through the abolition of general compulsory military service and replacing it with a professional military. A broader objective is the control of the institutions of the state by civil society and, ultimately, a transformation of Russia into a state under the rule of law (Hinterhuber 2001).

To summarize, liberal discourse, articulated in the debate mainly by Soldiers’ Mothers, sees the Sychev incident as evidence of the lack in Russia of a tradition and politics of human rights. Soldiers’ Mothers challenge the nationalist “principle of contribution” as a determinant of one’s belonging to the collective. They do so through their resistance to the military discipline and authority and by emphasizing the role of the provider over the role of soldier. Moreover, by highlighting the local, physical, and social context of the subject, they draw attention to a different aspect of his personality and articulate a counter-hegemonic conception of masculinity. The political aims of this discourse are to advocate a reform of the armed forces and to facilitate a democratic transformation process.
A Single Incident, Three Diagnoses

So far the discussion has focused on the nationalist and liberal discourses as they relate to divergent norms of citizenship and masculinity. This section will analyze how various actors in the debate explained the causes of *dedovshchina*, a central topic of the Sychev scandal.

*Dedovshchina*, which literally means “rule of grandfathers,” refers to the informal hierarchical “status system” in the Russian army, “...in which those who have been in the service for a shorter period are forcibly suppressed, exploited, and systematically maltreated by senior servicemen” (Hinterhuber 2001). As the details of the Sychev incident unfolded, *dedovshchina* reached the forefront of public debate. Table 1 shows the number of times the word “*dedovshchina*” was used in central media by date.

Table 1. Frequency of mentioning the word "*dedovshchina*" in central media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of publications mentioning the word &quot;<em>dedovshchina</em>&quot; and its derivatives</th>
<th>Percentage from all publications for a given period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 1-8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 9-15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 16-22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 23-29</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 30 - Feb. 2</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>1.198</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the debate surrounding the Sychev affair, numerous explanations for the causes of dedovshchina were advanced, from the nature of the military institutions themselves to society-wide ills to the problems of individual soldiers. While some saw dedovshchina as a more or less universal phenomenon rooted in the nature of the military itself (i.e., developing aggressiveness), others saw the problem tied specifically to the Russian practice of a two-year compulsory military service. Yet another explanation had been that the problems in the army were symptomatic of societal problems; dedovshchina, in this case, was a result of “society’s moral pathology.” Finally, some saw cases of hazing as individual aberrations and tried to draw a psychological portrait of a typical victim and a perpetrator.

It is clear that each of the purported causes of dedovshchina outlined above is located at a different level of analysis: institutional/political (i.e. the army), social, and individual. These can be called the “three bodies,” following the critical interpretive approach in medical anthropology (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1990). The individual body is self-explanatory: it is the embodied self and how it is experienced in health and sickness. The body politic denotes “…the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies (individual and collective) in reproduction and sexuality, work, leisure, and sickness” (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1990:50-51). The relationship between the individual and political body is of particular significance in the army. The stability of the military, as well as any political regime, rests on its ability to control population, i.e. the social body, and to regulate individual bodies. Finally, the social body can be understood as the “…representational uses of the body as a natural symbol with which to think about nature, society, and culture” (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1990:5). A healthy body offers a model of social unity and cohesion; a sick body implies social disharmony and conflict. Conversely, society in “sickness” and in “health” serves as a framework for understanding the body. In the case of Sychev, his tortured and mutilated body signifies a society in crisis.

The important point regarding the nationalist and the liberal discourses is that, in addition to articulating divergent norms of citizenship and masculinity, they disagreed about the causes of dedovshchina. The nationalist discourse located the problem at a broad level of the social body while the liberal discourse diagnosed it at the level of the body politic. Specifically, military officials representing in the debate the nationalist position saw dedovshchina as a symbol of a society in sickness. The quote from the Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov, mentioned earlier, directly invokes this association. According to Ivanov, “…it is impossible to speak about our society as a healthy body.”
In Ivanov’s speech, as well as numerous other statements from military officials, politicians, and journalists, the cause of dedovshchina is located at the level of the social body – in “moral pathology of the society.” The moral pathology is evident in the crime rate nation wide, which, according to Ivanov, is higher than in the armed forces. This pathology stems in part from the devaluation of traditional values and national ideals in collective conscience.

One of the more popularly accepted causes of dedovshchina related to the experience of blue-collar childhood. Military officials especially liked to point out that a typical recruit is likely to have experience from the early childhood with bezotsovshchina (i.e. growing up without father), vodka, drugs, and sledstvennii izolyator (detention center)12 (Ishchenko 2006). Thus, problems in the army have deep social roots.

To address these problems military officials advocated military reforms aimed at restoring “social justice.” The meaning of this term was explained by Minister Ivanov, who said that today’s Russian army can be considered “peasant-worker,” which is unjust because all social strata should serve. The precise meaning of “social justice” became clear when nine out of total twenty five grounds for deferral from military service were revoked.

It should be noted that diagnosing the problem at the level of the social body served the immediate goals of military officials. By emphasizing such socio-economic problems as crime, inequality, alcoholism and poor health conditions, military officials directed public attention away from the violation of the rights of the members of the armed forces. By arguing that problems in the armed forces have deep social roots they absolved themselves of the responsibility for the military crimes. Restoring “social justice” addressed the problem of an abysmal rate of recruitment, a major concern for military officials.13 In the end, the armed forces were constructed as a solution to social problems. In this interpretation, only army discipline could correct social delinquency.

By contrast, Soldiers’ Mothers, articulating the liberal discourse, saw the problem as being with military institutions. They argued that living conditions in the military contribute directly to the development of dedovshchina. The draftees’ two years14 in the armed forces are characterized by a “barrack existence,” without adequate provision of
food, warm clothing, and medical service (Hinterhuber 2001: 2). Finally, the very structure of the “rule of grandfathers” is facilitated by the Russian practice of two drafting periods per year. This system allows “the build up of different groups that dissociate themselves from each other” (Hinterhuber 2001: 1-2).

The themes of political genocide and the “invalidization” of the young people by the army, invoked by Soldiers’ Mothers, imply that the cause of dedovshchina lies at the body politic – the army and, more broadly, the institutions of the state. This association is evident in a quote from the declaration issued by Soldiers’ Mothers and the party Yabloko, mentioned earlier.

What happened speaks to the fact that, alas, the main state secret in Russia, protected by all means possible, is the welfare and security of bureaucrats. The judicial system, the office of prosecutor, and even firefighters and physicians are put in such conditions that they have to take care first of all of the nondisclosure of malfeasances (nerazglashenie dolzhnostnih prestuplenii), which very often lead to the death of people, many people in our country. (“Yabloko” 2006)

In other words, the bureaucrats’ lack of accountability to civil society creates a state in which the individual is extremely vulnerable to the system’s abuses. The violation of human rights goes undiscovered and unpunished.

The identification of the problem at the level of the body politic coincides with the Soldiers’ Mothers political objectives. Since their self-declared primary goal is to contribute to the development of a civil society and the transformation of Russia into a state under the rule of law, it is not surprising that they are highly critical of the abuses of state power (Hinterhuber 2001: 4-5). As they demand far-reaching military reforms, it is no coincidence that they use the Sychev scandal as evidence of the inadequacy of the current military system.

To quickly summarize the above discussion, military officials, in accordance with their political objectives, tend to diagnose the problem at the level of the social body while Soldiers’ Mothers locate it at the level of the body politic. The third type of diagnosis is the individual body. In the Sychev scandal debate, this position is articulated by some psychologists and government-employed experts on the military. These experts identified the causes of dedovshchina at the individual level, saying that dedovshchina is a reaction to intelligent soldiers’ unwillingness to “average themselves down” (Prezident 2006). They claimed that “soldier-intellectuals in the army are useless” (Prezident 2006). Interestingly, the experts did not oppose the anti-intellectual mood in the army, arguing instead that in the average (usrednennii) military environment, an intellectual had to either “average himself down”
(usrednit'sya) to survive or he would become a major object of mockery: “Smart ones are disliked everywhere.”

A more sophisticated diagnosis at the level of the individual body is offered in the debate by doctors. It is linked to the medical-scientific discourse, which provides a final authoritative reading of the Sychev incident. For this reason, it is discussed at length in the next section.

The Medical-Scientific Discourse

The significance of medical-scientific discourse in the Sychev scandal should be considered in relation to the ideas on mind/body dualism, which are commonly associated with René Descartes. Within the framework of Cartesian dualism, mind and body are treated as distinct entities (Descartes 1641). Physiological states are separated from their psychological and behavioral expressions. These ideas have influenced the development of natural and clinical studies and have major implications on how we think today about sickness. The logic of dualism is evident in the debate on the Sychev incident: once the physiological cause of his condition is found, social and environmental factors are no longer seen to be relevant.

To understand the role of the medical-scientific discourse in the Sychev incident debate it is important to note the contrast between the early media reports that focus on the torture and beatings as a direct precursor to Sychev’s condition and the later statements by military doctors that emphasize his genetic disease. As first accounts of the hazing incident emerged, the brutality of the torture comes to the forefront. At least two versions circulate. According to the first, the elder soldiers made Sychev squat for more than three hours while beating him on his legs. The second version is that he was tied to a bed so tightly that the blood could not circulate properly, and he was also beaten. Moreover, there was mention of rape in the earliest reports.

Later on, new versions appeared in the media that raise the possibility of “self-mutilation,” meaning that Sychev injected something in his vein in order to be discharged from the army, or that he asked the elder soldiers to beat him up so that he could be discharged. While these later versions have not gained much credibility, General Maslov has maintained that accusations of Sychev’s beating, mockery, and torture are unsubstantiated.

In the end, the doctors who treated Sychev at the military Burdenko hospital, diagnose him with homozygote thrombophilia which
is a genetic disease associated with increased propensity to form blood clots. As they explain, homozygote means that boys are the ones who usually suffer from this disease. The mother, in this case, is a carrier. Interviews with military ER doctors who treated Sychev appear in the media, bringing the individual, organic, causes of the affliction to the forefront, while relegate the social and structural conditions to the background. Sychev, it is now argued, lost his legs not so much as a result of dedovshchina rather than a serious genetic disease.

Here a contrast of the medical-scientific discourse with other discourses should be noted. Unlike nationalist and liberal discourses, which locate the cause of dedovshchina at the level of the social body and the body politic, respectively, the medical-scientific discourse explains dedovshchina away by locating the cause of affliction at the level of the individual body. Moreover, the emphasis on a hereditary nature of the disease and its transmission from mother to son serves as a subtle way to blame mothers. In this sense, doctors are discursively aligned with military officials and conservative politicians who define their position in opposition to Soldiers’ Mothers.

Whether the disease was real or invented especially for Sychev with military officials’ prodding is another matter. The important point is that once the version with no beatings was reproduced by “demigods in white coats,” it quickly acquired a kind of scientific legitimacy (Dölling et al. 2000: 128). At the same time, the public was confused. What, after all, came first – the chicken or the egg, thrombophlia or the fact that Sychev had been squatting, not to say beaten, for more than three hours?

Professor Vyacheslav Klyuzhev, head of the prestigious Burdenko Military Hospital where Sychev was treated, and the main anesthesiologist-resuscitator Vladimir Pas’ko offered their explanations: There is a cause of illness and there are conditions that either facilitate this cause or impede it, they explained. In the case of Andrei Sychev, triggering mechanisms could be numerous: exposure to cold temperatures, prolonged tight pressure on the limbs, furuncles.15 “In this particular case, speaking of Andrei, we do not want to talk about the conditions that might have facilitated this mechanism. When he arrived, we saw that he had thrombosis in all venous systems; we investigated that and found out that all his blood vessels are affected…. We understood right away that this is a system disease… a genetic one.” According to Doctor Klyuzhev, Sychev was doomed from the start: “It all depended on when he would meet a facilitating factor.” Squatting by itself could not have such serious implications. If he were a healthy guy, he would get up and walk after a three-hour “training.” In response to a journalist’s

---

15 Furuncle (boil) is a skin disease caused by the infection of hair follicles, resulting in the localized accumulation of pus and dead tissue.
provocative question: “That is, we should ask God and not the military system why Sychev lost his legs?” Klyuzhev responded: “It was a bad luck for the guy – 100 percent…” (Mikhailova 2006).

In sum, the medical-scientific discourse locates the source of the problem at the level of the individual body, in Sychev’s medical condition. The genetic disease serves as a major explanation while the act of violence is discursively marginalized. Signifying a long tradition of mind/body dualism in natural and clinical studies, the correlation between physiological predisposition to blood clotting and limb loss is treated immediately as evidence that the latter is an entirely biological problem. No social or psychological causes need to be invoked. The army becomes only a triggering mechanism that set the illness in motion.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Sychev incident debate reveals that the liberal discourse, far from providing the dominant interpretation, was overshadowed by the nationalist and medical-scientific discourses that deflected the responsibility of military officials for violation of rights of soldiers. In the medical-scientific reading, the act of violence disappears almost completely from the picture. Sychev’s genetic illness bears all the blame while the army becomes only a triggering mechanism that set the illness in motion.

As various participants in the debate offered their interpretations of the incident, they simultaneously advanced their political and ideological agendas. Thus, a single hazing incident becomes at the same time a symbol the society’s “moral pathology,” the “invalidization” of the young people by the army and a “facilitating factor” in the progression of a genetic illness. In each of these interpretations, the participants diagnosed a different social or political ill at a different level or “body.” Their diagnoses reflected their position in the political spectrum. Military officials and members of the ruling party wanted to reproduce the political legitimacy of the current administration. Soldiers’ Mothers sought to challenge the status quo and spearhead Russia on a path toward a more democratic state. Doctors and government-employed experts on the military seemed to conspire with military officials and bureaucrats in maintaining the current system.

The linkage of these various themes and political objectives to a single discursive event – the Sychev scandal – demonstrates the logic of a discursive knot. It served as a focal point in the debate, around which various actors articulated their broad political objectives, removed from the immediate fate of Sychev. As conflicting norms were tied in the
ultimate interpretation of the incident, the Sychev scandal exposed current Russian ideological struggles over norms of citizenship and masculinity. In this context, what constitutes a contribution to the “collective good” and how masculinity should be defined are far from settled issues. As Soldiers’ Mothers fight on behalf of the victims of hazing for the recognition of their rights and their masculinity, the challenges that they face in the discursive realm indicate a long road to a democratic transformation of Russia.

References

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.


“Deputat Gossoveta Komi: Armiya – eto institut, pri pomoshhi kotorogo gosudarstvo provodit politicheskii genotsid protiv svoego naroda” [Deputy of the Komi State Assembly: the army is an institution with
the help of which the state carries out political genocide against its

Descartes, René. 1641. Meditations on First Philosophy, in The
Philosophical Writings of René Descartes, trans. by J. Cottingham, R.
Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

the New Federal States: Is Sterilization an Act of Resistance?” In
Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after
University Press.

Emeshin, Konstantin: “Kto vizhivet, tot horoshii soldat?” [He who
survives is a good soldier?] Regnum (2006).
2006.

Finn, Peter. 2006a. “Violent Bullying of Russian Conscripts Exposed.”

Finn, Peter. 2006b. “Russia’s Signal to Stations Is Clear: Cut U.S.
(http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/06/AR2006070601760.html). Retrieved

New York: Pantheon.


Effect: Studies in Governmentality, edited by G. Burchell, C. Gordon,

Saving Minister Ivanov.] Kommersant-Vlast , February 6.

Hinterhuber, Eva Maria. 2001. “Between Neotraditionalism and New
Resistance – Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg.” Anthropology of


Litovkin, Dmitrii. 2006a. “Otsrochki, kotorie mi poteryali. Ostalos’ 16 prichin, po kotorim mozho izbezhat’ priziva v armiyu.” [Deferrals that we lost. 16 reasons are left for evading conscription to the army.] Izvestiya, March 31.

Litovkin, Dmitrii, 2006b. “Mi ne mozhem postroit’ vokrug armii kamennuyu stenu.” Sergei Ivanov predlozhil sposobi bor’bi s dedovshchina.” [“We cannot build a stone wall around the army.”] Sergei Ivanov suggested means of fighting dedovshchina.] Isvestiya, February 16.


“Sluzhba po prizivu v Rossii sokhranitsya do 2030 goda.” [Compulsory military service in Russia will be retained until 2030.] August 1, 2008 (http://www.izbrannoe.ru/43468.html).

Sokolov-Mitrich, Dmitrii. 2006. “Komu Rodina – mat’, a komu i papa. Pervii v Rossii Komitet soldatskih otsov znaet, kak poborot’ dedovshinu.” [For some the Motherland is mother but for others it is father. The first in Russia Committee of Soldiers’ Fathers knows how to overcome dedovshchina.] Izvestiya, March 31.


This content downloaded from 31.220.200.6 on Fri, 21 Mar 2014 12:39:53 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions


