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# The Inextricable Ties Between Society and The Army in Post-Soviet Russia: The Resurgence of *Shefstvo* Under Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin

- 1 The coming of *perestroika* and *glasnost*<sup>1</sup> meant that the Russian army's internal dysfunction, its financial difficulties, and the suffering endured by its conscripts (particularly *dedovshchina*, or violent hazing)<sup>2</sup> were finally revealed to Russia and to the rest of the world. The living conditions of servicemen and conscripts worsened with the return of the troops from Germany and the subsequent economic crisis, and corruption in the armed forces intensified the problem. The presidency of Boris Yeltsin not only failed to bring an end to these difficulties, it had quite the opposite effect.
- 2 A neglected and abandoned federal army soon began to develop a wide range of survival strategies; actual farms were set up inside the barracks and officers took on second jobs (a practice largely encouraged by the army's leadership). Yet these countermeasures did not bring an end to the crisis - the army only sank deeper into it. Living conditions within the army continued to deteriorate.
- 3 During the chaotic period which extended through the mid-2000's, the population, the local authorities, and various enterprises all rallied in an unprecedented way to come to the army's aid, ensure safe conditions for the recruits and thus compensate for the government's deficiencies. Although a large part of the population - mainly from large urban areas<sup>3</sup> - regularly devised various complicated strategies to have their children exempted from the obligation of military service<sup>4</sup>, there were also others - mostly from the regions - who gave generous aid to the starving soldiers.
- 4 This mobilization of the population and local governments was made possible largely due to an affiliation between the army and society that dates back to Trotsky; ties that were internalised by the population during the Soviet period and resurfaced in post-Soviet Russia. The cultivation of patronage relations, known as "*shefstvo*" (patronage or sponsorship), appeared within the Red Army at the end of the Russian Civil War. The government saw *shefstvo* as constituting a genuine "relationship" between the army and the local authorities. Its objective was twofold, as it aimed both to procure for the military material aid, such as monetary donations and essential supplies, and also to promote certain ideological aims, such as unity between the army and the people.
- 5 The form of "*shefstvo*" that took hold at the beginning of the 1990s was informal and only involved material support. It was spontaneously initiated by the population as a response to the army's dire financial situation, and was only later taken up by the regional authorities. As the years went by, the phenomenon gradually underwent a change without entirely vanishing. While the presidency of Vladimir Putin did contribute to better living conditions in the army, it did not eliminate the practice of *shefstvo*. Thus there is a paradox, one that this text aims to decipher by analyzing the origins of this phenomenon, the conditions surrounding its resurgence, and its forms and variations under Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin.

## The Origins of *Shefstvo*

- 6 First appearing within the Red Army at the end of the Civil War, under Trotsky's command, *shefstvo* (i.e., patronage or sponsorship), established relations between the army and the local authorities or collectivities<sup>5</sup>. It is a form of benevolent material aid in which a patron (from the

French word “*chef*”) provides donations of warm clothing, provisions, books, and money to a “client” (i.e., an Army unit, naval ship, etc). Patronage simultaneously performs two functions: a material one and an ideological one. *Shefstvo* was part of a campaign that promoted “unity between the army and the people”<sup>6</sup> while the creation of the Soviet army had two objectives - democratising the army and militarizing civil society.

7 According to Trotsky, the relations forged by *shefstvo* were supposed to “help to raise in every Red Army soldier the elevated consciousness of the citizen-soldier, a defender of the first republic of labour in the world, and by that strengthen the internal unity of all the parts of the army and the unity of the army as a whole with all working people”<sup>7</sup>.

8 *Shefstvo* became more significant after hyperinflation and bankruptcy forced the state to shift the economic burden of sustaining the Red Army onto the local governments. By October 1921, it had become an important element contributing to the survival of the Army, and a widespread practice. The practice became standardized according to the model used in Moscow, a form that required a combat formation to be associated with a local government, while leaving smaller units to be paired with a local government, factories, cooperatives, or any other similar social organization<sup>8</sup>. Under the NEP, private enterprises also became involved in *shefstvo*. Preferential relations were established between the *Komsomol* and the Navy, and these connections would last until the fall of the Soviet Union, long outlasting their immediate purpose of motivating young volunteers to join the Navy<sup>9</sup>.

9 In the middle of the 1920s, the improved economic situation and the growing stability of the military rendered the material aspect of *shefstvo* increasingly unnecessary. Moreover, *shefstvo*, by its very nature, proved to be a fertile ground for corruption to take root and came to be denounced by many commanders<sup>10</sup>. Since regional economic disparities contributed to unequal living conditions for the troops, these commanders even requested its suppression so as to avoid creating resentment and destroying the “spiritual camaraderie” of the troops<sup>11</sup>.

10 *Shefstvo* subsequently took an ideological turn, making this shift around the end of 1924. The Army gave up practicing *Shefstvo* on the level of material support. Once the army had evolved into a pillar of Soviet society, *shefstvo* began to be seen as a way of influencing the public, particularly within the more rural areas. The organization and management of *shefstvo* were confided to the army’s political commissars in order to preserve the purely ideological status of *shefstvo* within the Army.

11 Yet in reality, *shefstvo* continued to exist, despite an announcement in December of 1924 that the *Revvoensovet* (the supreme authority of the Red Army) had brought an end to the practice<sup>12</sup>. Since material support was still possible under certain conditions, large amounts of cash kept circulating, and would continue to do so for several years. General Petrenko, who would later help liberate a Nazi concentration camp, described *shefstvo* as it was practiced in the 1930s:

“There is a certain detail that needs to be stressed regarding the relations between the regiment and the local authorities. It has to do with the ‘patronage’, as it was called, of the businesses that supported various army units. According to tradition, our ‘patron’ - a factory in the village of Satka - provided us with large sums of money, and it did this in the simplest possible way. In 1934, after the harvests, I came back to the camp with a briefcase full of bills, which I handed over to the commander. At the factory, in the director’s office, I had just to sign an acquittance roll where it was simply marked “donation from sponsor”.<sup>13</sup>

12 Financial sponsorship remained in effect until the start of the war and persisted after it ended<sup>14</sup>. This sort of *shefstvo* was officially optional, but a refusal to participate could bring about serious consequences—a factory manager, for example, could risk losing his job. In the 1950s, however, *shefstvo* evolved into more institutionalized, less constraining forms that lasted until the fall of the USSR; for example, students and employers were obligated to give a symbolic sum to their local branch of DOSAAF, the Society for Voluntary Society of Assistance to the Army, the Air Force and the Navy.

## The Conditions Leading to the Re-Emergence of *Shefstvo*

13 The resurgence of *shefstvo* under Boris Yeltsin was made possible by several interrelated factors. The convergence of these factors made for a sharp decline in the troops' standard of living, a downturn that promptly elicited public sympathy for the armed forces once it was exposed. The resulting wave of emotion contributed decisively to the resurgence of the popularity of *shefstvo*.

### An Army Abandoned

14 The impoverished state of the army was foremost among these factors. It resulted not only from the successive economic crises plaguing the country just up to the end of the Soviet Union but also from the liberal reforms within the state sector that were aimed at decreasing governmental support and privatising state services (going as far as a creeping privatisation of regalian functions such as defence). The cuts in military spending plunged the military into a state of long-term crisis, so that sheer survival became the army's chief concern.

15 Both Russian and American military analysts agree that the ruinous financial situation of the armed forces can also be blamed on Boris Yeltsin's policies, including both his defiant attitude towards them – an approach leading to the army's involvement in the putsch — and his plan to neutralize their power<sup>15</sup>. One way he implemented this policy was to reduce the funds that were dispensed to the regular army. The facts speak for themselves: in 1995, the Ministry of Finance “neglected” to pay out the funds required to feed the troops, even though this sum had been fixed by an appropriations bill, and this omission left the unit commanders no choice but to seek ways to deal with their expenses through their own initiatives. Inflation and delays in the payments of military wages made the situation that much worse<sup>16</sup>.

16 The return of troops previously stationed in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Germany, and the Baltic States also carried social and financial costs that added to the dilapidated state of the army. Approximately seven hundred thousand men were brought back, and the majority were unable to be absorbed by an organisation that remained largely dependent on contractual labour agreements; this meant that a certain number of officers were reduced to homelessness. Even before these soldiers returned, the families of one hundred seventy-five thousand servicemen were already living in deplorable conditions. To make matters worse, a wider reform of the Russian army had been undertaken that involved reducing the overall military workforce, yet these measures were implemented without any accompanying measures of social protection, and the officers in question found themselves facing a housing shortage. The few measures that the government had managed to put in place were foiled by corruption. Additional corruption also tainted services that were highly sensitive and vital to the Army's proper functioning, (Rear Services (*Tyl*), the funds allocated for the social protection of demobilized soldiers, etc.), and whose deterioration would entail yet another serious crisis — thus one crisis generated another.

17 In 1995, the press revealed that deaths from malnutrition had occurred; furthermore, it was announced that the once “untouchable” reserve stocks (strictly reserved for wartime situations) had been opened<sup>17</sup>, both in the regiments and also in the elite Suvorov academies<sup>18</sup>, and the Russian airborne troops complained about only receiving full rations just prior making a jump, barely once a month<sup>19</sup>. The troops in Chechnya were sent off to combat without adequate rations, without gloves and without any change of clothing. During the winter of 1996, bread deliveries were suspended in the Urals due to unmade payments<sup>20</sup>, and in the Pacific Fleet, 10 % of the new recruits showed symptoms of malnutrition and were placed under observation. As a consequence of all these factors, over half of all young officers quit the armed forces<sup>21</sup>. Those who stayed took a second job in order to survive, since the officers had amassed no savings<sup>22</sup> and since 42 % of their wives were not employed<sup>23</sup>. New budget cuts came in 1997. In that year, the army only received 56 % of the funds budgeted for it: it received just 43% of

the funds allotted for medical services, 41 % of those designated for equipment and clothing, and 50% of the budget that had been promised for feeding the troops<sup>24</sup>.

18 In August 1998, the collapse of the rouble triggered crises in the financial and public health domains, forcing the Ministry of Defence to follow through with the needed measures. The Ministry launched an appeal through the press to all servicemen, urging them to "fish, hunt, farm the land, and collect mushrooms to survive until the federal government can gather enough money to pay the overdue wages of the officers"<sup>25</sup>. The Ministry sent a directive to all the units' second in command, responsible as they were for discipline and morale, and requested them to organize group excursions for servicemen and their families in order to "collect berries and mushrooms"<sup>26</sup>. According to the daily newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, the directive advised the officers and their families to make their own preserves of fruits and vegetables<sup>27</sup>. In 1999, a telegram was sent to all the military regions and all the different fleets of the Navy, informing them that Lt. General Vladimir Isikoff, head of logistics and supplies at the time, had ordered for only half portions of rations to be served "until further notice"<sup>28</sup>.

19 The units developed a form of internal self-subsistence. Livestock was raised and kitchen gardens were cultivated, and for several years the Russian press was filled with photos of servicemen caring for their pigs and ducks, planting cabbages and potatoes, and putting up small pens next to their tanks and hangers in order to raise rabbits<sup>29</sup>.

20 The phenomenon of an army left to provide for its own basic needs, and thus beset by poverty and shortages, is not an entirely new one: historians of the Russian army have pointed out similar situation in other eras. It is striking that the post-Soviet army continues to resemble the Russian army and the Soviet army in this respect. The historian E.K. Wirtschafter described as follows the government's inability to regulate the servicemen's internal economy, despite early measures taken by Peter the Great:

"As early as the reign of Peter the Great, the central government began to supply the army with pay, equipment, ammunition, and weapons, with sources of food and forage, and with material for clothing and footwear. Sometimes these items came directly from grain magazines and state factories, but more often than not the troops were expected to satisfy their own physical needs, using resources extracted from civilian society and monies acquired from the government or through private contractual work. Although the law required that local communities provide quarters, fuel, and food and that the unit commander deliver to each soldier his allotted pay, provisions, and clothing, the central authorities could never guarantee that the prescribed goods were readily available."<sup>30</sup>

21 Under Nicolas I, state-sponsored supplies were so inadequately furnished that the regiment commanders regularly had to resort to their own ingenuity to provide for the needs of their men. Certain regiments, lacking lodging and nourishment, set about creating collectively owned business ventures; for example, in 1826 the Preobrajenski regiment owned three vegetable gardens, a bathhouse, and three shops whose proceeds went to the soldiers and commanding officers<sup>31</sup>. The writer S. Alexievich interviewed soldiers on operations in Afghanistan during the Soviet era : many complained of hunger which went on for months, during which they passed their time wondering if they might be able to "find or steal something to eat"<sup>32</sup>. The army's reliance upon a strategy of subsistence meant that it found itself regularly dependent upon civil society. This is also true in the post-Soviet period, as can be seen in the descriptions given above.

## A Crisis Extending Beyond the Barracks

22 The officer corps of the post-Soviet Army have developed various survival strategies for coping with the crisis undermining the very institution meant to shelter them, yet these strategies have posed a danger to the cohesiveness of the Russian army as an institution

at times, and most likely have put the government in danger as well. The ways in which servicemen have adapted to the circumstances imply the presence of conduct at odds with the role of the military and also with the goal of democratizing the Army and the country as a whole; these include resorting to corruption, allowing state property to dilapidate, moonlighting or having a second job etc.<sup>33</sup> These strategies, though condemnable, are not particularly disturbing to a population that views working in the underground economy as its national sport<sup>34</sup>, and that has grown accustomed to watching guilty parties go unpunished<sup>35</sup>. Many high-ranking officials who were guilty of embezzlement have never been penalised for their actions. Even when brought before a military court, they were pardoned while their subordinates were usually condemned<sup>36</sup>. Further evidence of their impunity can be seen in the general amnesty granted in 1998 to all generals and admirals accused of corruption (thirty of the preliminary inquiries brought by General Iuri Diomin, the military procurer at the time, were dismissed with no further consequences)<sup>37</sup>. As shown in an article authored by Jennifer Mathers in 1995, the impunity granted to officers incriminated in various major scandals, especially in Germany, led Russian military officers to believe that such actions as "accepting bribes, selling state property, and putting personal interests before those of the country" would not be prosecuted<sup>38</sup>. In the end, what most touched the population was the media coverage of officers and soldiers reduced to begging in the streets, not to mention the practice of "enslaving" soldiers, which occurs when the officers hire out the sole workforce available to them, the conscripts.

23 There is yet another element that has helped trigger the kind of public sympathy for the military required for an institution like *shestvo* to resurface; namely, changes in the tradition of violent hazing (*dedovshchina*) and its expansion beyond the strict limits of the barracks. While a large part of the population seems to tolerate violent hazing within the Army (long considered an obligatory rite of passage)<sup>39</sup>, the new methods of hazing have put this tolerance to the test. While *dedovshchina* originated as a complex system of hazing that helped to keep order in the barracks, the phenomenon has undergone a transformation in light of the recent decline in the army's living conditions, particularly the shortage of food. The same economic difficulties that brought havoc on the army and gravely lessened the availability of the very items most necessary to a soldier - food and money - have served to change the nature of *dedovshchina* and have caused it to expand into the civil population, whereas it was previously confined to the military domain. The nature of hazing has also undergone a change - whereas it once consisted of simply humiliating new recruits (by forcing them to make beds, do the housework, and clean the toilets), the new modes of hazing were such that the familiar lot of the new recruit included having his meals extorted<sup>40</sup>, his savings stolen, and the packages sent to him by his family intercepted. The senior conscripts, or "*dedy*", also bullied the younger soldiers into writing their parents with requests for money. Finally, the area immediately surrounding the military unit was also affected: the number of thefts and looting of neighbouring houses multiplied, providing plenty of news briefs for local civilian and military papers.

### Maintaining the Army Becomes a Local Affair

24 Concerned with halting the process of disintegration that was threatening Russia, Boris Yeltsin, from 1992 onward, progressively implemented a policy of federalism that re-defined and more clearly demarcated the boundary separating the powers held by the central government and its subordinate entities. Beginning in 1992-1993, the economic burden of the army was shifted onto the local governments, when enthusiasm for federalism ran high and regional governments were being affirmed against the central powers. Shifting this financial burden also provided a way to cope with cuts in federal funding for the army that had been made earlier that same year. In the domain of social welfare, certain parallels can be drawn between the system providing for civilian social benefits and the one designed for the

servicemen; both lack of central management, for example. Yet the welfare of soldiers posed a far greater problem than that of the general public, and of a different nature, since it was much feared that a system of allegiances would take root between the unit commanders and the regional authorities (i.e., loyalty would be exchanged for a guarantee of decent living conditions). In both cases, the level of protection guaranteed by a region depended upon its own economic situation. For even though the regional authorities who made contributions to the army were thus able to retain a portion of taxes destined for the federal budget, this measure did not erase the significant economic inequalities between the regions. The amount of financing that was available for re-establishing the troops back from abroad, or that was provided by regions and towns for the upkeep of the units, varied greatly from one base-camp to another, and this created conditions of inequality within an already impoverished military. True, certain inventive regions managed to overcome their lack of funds, and took innovative measures to deliver the targeted military aid. But other regions refused to take responsibility for financing the troops that were re-established on their territory, and at times their refusals led to the need for negotiations between the central government and refractory regional ones. The central government did not always emerge victorious: there are several accounts in the military press of solutions in which the central authorities were cornered into contributing to the costs of upkeep for a certain unit. In the poorest regions, on the other hand, the need to negotiate the bare necessities for survival sometimes led to a direct dialogue between the unit commanders and the local authorities - suppressing thereby a link in the chain of command. The question of basic sustenance thus became a local concern.

25 The fact that officers were conducting negotiations with local officials tended to blur the boundaries between the army and the local and regional political powers. Along with other factors described above, this rapprochement, combined with government inadequacy at even the local level, set the stage for the resurgence of those inextricable ties - initially forged during the Soviet experience - known as "*shfstvo*".

## ***Shfstvo's* Forms and Variations**

26 *Shfstvo* belongs to that group of phenomena commonly known to Russian specialists as "informal practices"<sup>41</sup>. Through it, channels are established to allow objects, goods, and even money to circulate outside of institutional networks and without being subjected to regular forms of inspection or oversight. Should the state prove incapable of providing certain services, *shfstvo* provides a way to compensate for this lack. Yet *shfstvo* as a phenomenon also qualifies as a form of "gift" insofar as it involves the trade of goods, and it is thus presumed that the donor will benefit from some reciprocity (either on the symbolic or concrete level) from the recipient. A study of how the types of these donations to the army have evolved from Yeltsin's presidency to Putin's must therefore take into account the motives underlying these gifts - and changes in these over time - as well as the potential advantages expected by the donor.

27 Given the fact that every gift puts the recipient in a state of obligation<sup>42</sup>, did the military personnel considered themselves exempt from reciprocity (insofar as the sense of duty outweighed the service rendered) or did they feel instead a sense of indebtedness? If the latter was the case, in what ways were they able to reciprocate?

## **The Yeltsin Era: from Material *Shfstvo* to Social *Shfstvo***

### *The Emergence of Local Solidarity*

28 The *shfstvo* which sprang up just after the dissolution of the USSR and the formation of the Russian army fell clearly into the category of humanitarian aid: the immediate survival of the troops was at stake. Aid consisting of food and clothing was initially given in the form of individual donations (coming from people dwelling near the barracks and from local farms)

while later relief came out of collections organized by municipalities and local governments. Notably, the donations offered during the first critical moments was spontaneously given. Though partly related to the proximity of the army, donations increasingly came from all over Russia, thanks to the press articles and television reports monitoring the army's dramatic ordeal.

29 The private sector also got involved with helping to rescue the army: construction materials and equipment were donated, heating systems and dilapidated roofs were repaired, barracks were either fixed up or newly constructed, food supplies and furniture were given (tables, chairs, etc). In Chechnya, where officers and conscripts suffered from both cold and hunger<sup>43</sup>, a Moscow bank provided the soldiers with *shapkas* (fur hats) for their first winter<sup>44</sup>. In 1998 the "Murmansk", a vessel manned by troops on border guard duty and itself stationed in the city of Murmansk, was sponsored by nineteen different businesses and commercial groups since the state could only provide for 20 % of its needs. The level of state support for the entire north fleet was only 24 % in 1998<sup>45</sup>.

30 Starting from 1993, the declining level of central support for the regions, mentioned earlier, helped to strengthen the proximity-based bonds that arose between units and their regions. The Rear Services (TyL), itself rife with corruption, was unable to feed the troops in spite of the 83 *sovkhoses* and 34 farms that it counted among its holdings in 1993. Therefore the army had to supply itself through the civil economy.

31 Accounts published in the press indicate that local authorities, though unable to fully make up for the central government's default, did consider themselves obliged to provide all possible means of aid. In 1998, when a submarine stationed at Skalitski received a donation of 20 tons of potatoes, cabbages, carrots, and beets, the mayor of Bryansk spoke at the occasion, saying: "we are all equally poor today, but these boys are our boys, no matter what happens. We consider it our duty to aid help them as much as we can."<sup>46</sup> Thus it was that despite inadequate municipal finances, the regional authorities and the unit commanders arranged for an exchange of services: the military frequently provided labour for the fields or performed local policing duties in exchange for food. Certain inventive regions managed, despite their small budgets, to take innovative measures allowing them to provide the appropriate forms of aid. The village of Bryansk, for example, arranged to collect food and supplies from private businesses that lacked the money for paying their taxes. These businesses agreed to supply provisions to a submarine in exchange for cancellation of their public debts<sup>47</sup>.

32 Greatly touched by these striking displays of solidarity on their behalf - *shestvo* played an essential role in keeping up the moral of the troops - the military began to feel that they could count upon the civilian public. Those who had been drawing the fewest benefits from the practice soon began, in turn, to seek sponsors. Beginning in 1994-1995, the press featured many accounts of this phenomenon. In Murmansk, for example, it was reported that ship captains were requested by their superiors to "find 'sponsors' for their battleships" when they went home for a holiday in their hometowns<sup>48</sup>. To arouse sympathy for their plight, military officers did not hesitate to invite regional officials to visit their units or their vessels so that the latter could assess the situation for themselves.

33 During the initial period of *shestvo*'s resurgence, it is certainly possible that the Russian people's main motivation for maintaining the troops was a particular sense of moral obligation, one that dates back to the 1920's when it was first inculcated by Trotsky. Undoubtedly the public took a certain pride in its gesture and did not necessarily see it as a way to make the army beholden to them. Nevertheless, it should be recalled that those living the Soviet experience witnessed the development (and widespread internalization) of the need to build a network of social relations to fulfil each and every quotidian administrative procedure. So it is legitimate to ask whether the support given to the military was dictated by a need to maintain good relations with them, "just in case" their help would be needed. Mightn't a soldier's relatives

easily imagine that they could, by cultivating good relations with a well-placed officer of the military, protect their son from serving on the front lines if he happened to be sent to a combat zone? Given the prospect of the improvement of the economic conditions of the army, mightn't an entrepreneurial businessman expect, in exchange for putting on a good show of loyalty, to garner additional contracts for his business or to benefit from more generous attitude on the part of the regional authorities?

### *The Appearance of the Notion of Reciprocity Within Shefstvo*

34 The war in Chechnya brought the notion of indebtedness back to the forefront of the minds of the donors. Together, this war and the aforementioned intensification of *dedovshchina* helped to progressively incorporate the idea of compensation into the practice of *shefstvo*: the municipalities saw *shefstvo* as a way of gaining leverage over a destitute army, leverage which could be used to demand effective protection for their children.

35 To the extent that it was feasible, they established relations with the units that their children were sent to and made their donations contingent upon the latter's security and well-being. In other cases, in order to oversee their children more closely and ensure that their military service passed smoothly, donors offered support to particular unit or ship while simultaneously requesting for that same military authority to accept their own contingent of conscripts. In this sort of trade-off, the character of the gift changes and it falls into the domain of social welfare. For example, a certain region might commit to helping with the relocation of reclassified officers from downsized units - building them apartments<sup>49</sup>; another region might take extra measures to provide social protection for servicemen's families (mainly their spouses), and to prioritize hiring them in certain sectors. In the year 2000, the so-called extraterritorial principle was relaxed<sup>50</sup>, leading to an increase in this type of *shefstvo*. As long as the so-called extraterritorial principle remained in force, Russian conscripts were usually required to serve in regions that were far away from their place of residence, a practice that made regular visits from family members impossible. The relaxation of this principle, and an increased tolerance on the part of the military registration and enlistment office (*Voenkomat*) in charge of conscription, helped create stronger bonds between the civil population and the army since the conscripts' families were able to live in closer proximity to their children. This made them all the more inclined to resort to *shefstvo*.

36 As *shefstvo* underwent a change in its mode of functioning - from donations with moral reciprocity to donations with more concrete forms of reciprocity - it also moved into the social realm. Such a shift seems due both to the slight improvement in the army's material circumstances and to the long-standing and continual failure of the state to address the problem of social protection for servicemen - a situation that had been overshadowed by the question of basic survival but remains unchanged under Putin.

37 The shift, during the period studied, from gift of basic necessities to gift of leisure goods such as cassettes, video players, computers and books, is also a marker of the relative improvement in the military's living conditions.

## The Shift Towards Ideological *Shefstvo* Under Vladimir Putin

### *The Persistence of Material Shefstvo*

38 The Putin era was also marked by material *shefstvo*, which persisted at least up to the beginning of his second term (2004-2008). The financial situation of the armed forces remained a pressing issue, as there was still no certainty that their vital needs could be met. Numerous accounts in the press told of pilots having to beg near their garrisons<sup>51</sup>, or of conscripts forced to bring in revenue by panhandling, robbing civilian houses, or stealing cash and goods<sup>52</sup>. In October 2002, the North Caucasus branch of the Suvorov military academy<sup>53</sup> was forced to send 400 cadets home for a week when the school could not provide them with meals<sup>54</sup>.

In 2003, the Military Procurator General A. Savenkov gave an interview to the *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* in which he disclosed that officers had been feeding soldiers for years with something that "could not even be described as food"<sup>55</sup>. The financial crisis continued to plague the Russian army, and heavy restrictions remained upon the men in service. In February 2003, the budget for equipment and logistics did not even allocate 50 % of the amount required: the funds designated for military medical care were only one third of what was needed, while the central clothing supply department saw only twenty percent of the funds needed<sup>56</sup>. Similar cutbacks were imposed on Russia's Air Force<sup>57</sup>.

39 A joint report was prepared by representatives from the Ministries of Labour, Defence, Interior, and Civil Defence and Emergency Situations, and the FSB, showing how serious the situation had become for the armed forces<sup>58</sup>: in 2001, 46,2 % of families were still living under the poverty line; 45 % of families were unable to afford food; 70 % could not purchase clothes for themselves. Food alone comprised 52% of all spending, up from 44 % two years earlier.

40 In 2003, the NGO Human Rights Watch issued a report describing the lack of inadequate nutrition and health care as catastrophic<sup>59</sup>. The problem of housing remained one of the army's most pressing concerns. In January 2002, approximately 168 500 families (over 40 % of the total number of officers' families) had no housing at all. In such a context, it should come as no surprise that *shefstvo* persisted on the social and material level.

41 The Second Chechen War also had an impact on the continuation of *shefstvo*. Given that military equipment was defective, or simply nonexistent, the city officials of Norilsk, in the Far North, did not hesitate to supply "special equipment for night vision" to its own contingent of local recruits when they were deployed to Chechnya. The official handling public relations for the city of Norilsk explained the action in these terms: "The municipality has paid for their equipment. The city donated special night vision equipment. We wanted to bring about the best outcome for their deployment. We wanted to create the best conditions for their deployment. Thank god, they have all returned alive."<sup>60</sup>

### *The Army Takes the Initiative Concerning Shefstvo*

42 In February 2001<sup>61</sup>, the government launched a campaign to promote patriotism, involving the army, the schools, and the media in a program<sup>62</sup> designed to strengthen the "spiritual values of the Russian people"<sup>63</sup>. The effects became apparent from 2002 onward. According to the *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, the program tended to "bring the population together and restore patriotism" while also "motivating the young people to sign up for military service"<sup>64</sup>. In reality, its primary purpose was justifying the restoration of an authoritarian regime.

43 The army was called upon to play a role in this new social project. The relation of military authorities to *shefstvo* underwent a reversal: having started out as the beneficiaries of *shefstvo*, the military leaders instead began to initiate it. A practice spontaneously originated as a public initiative evolved into an official practice. The army appropriated what had started as a public cause: *shefstvo* became the official strategy for eradicating *dedovshchina* (violent hazing). Patronage was overtly encouraged by the government as well as the military authorities. The Moscow region in particular was heavily targeted with solicitations<sup>65</sup>. Both the towns and the *raions* (districts) of the Moscow *Oblast* (region) were paired with military units and naval vessels: the Moscow *Oblast* with the aircraft carrier "Admiral Kuznetsov", the warship Gremishchy with the town of Vidnoye, the naval coast guard vessel Zadornii with the city of Shchelkovo. Such arrangements were designed to reassure the populace about the risks facing the conscripts, as the Military Commissioner of the Moscow *Oblast* confirmed in 2003 when he said, "the bonds of patronage between the cities and the army are being strengthened and developed. Just last year, the Military Commissariat of Stupinsk and the city government concluded an agreement with the commander of a destroyer, while Dzerzinsk undertook to

equip a small naval missile launcher, the Geyzer. This ship is located the Baltic; soon there will also be inhabitants of the Moscow *Oblast* serving as its crew members”<sup>66</sup>.

44 In 2005, the Vladimir *Oblast* was paired with the Motorized Rifle Regiment from the *Oblast* of Sormovo Nizhegorodskoi; the conscripts from Vladimir would serve in the first company. In an interview with the *Parlamentskaia Gazeta*, the region’s military commissioner explained this case of patronage by saying: “[...] this unit isn't very far away. The parents will be able to visit, and see how their sons are performing their duties, how they are behaving. With people of the same region [*sredi svoikh*] hazing is going to decrease [...]”<sup>67</sup>.

#### *Institutionalization and Ritualization of Shefstvo*

45 Improvements in military living conditions that occurred at the beginning of Putin's second term paved the way for a shift towards a more ideological form of shefstvo. In 2005, Vladimir Putin announced a 67 % salary increase<sup>68</sup>, new housing programs were established, and the press stopped reporting cases of material *shefstvo*, even though serious problems did persist in this regard<sup>69</sup>. What was instead heard was talk of “constructive relations” and cooperative agreements “in the cultural and social domain”. The army presented itself as an social actor. Thus, already in 2002, the governor of the Moscow region, Boris Gromov (a former Army General) signed an agreement with the Director of the Federal Space Agency Anatoly Perminov in order to promote cooperation “in the social and cultural spheres”<sup>70</sup>. In 2003, the citizens of Moscow arranged the construction of vacation houses for naval personnel serving in the Black Sea Fleet<sup>71</sup>; the Volgograd administration did likewise for the men of the Caspian Flotilla. The cultural aspect of this cooperation consisted of the town’s letting the military teach classes in patriotism in their schools.

46 The accounts of servicemen published in the newspapers seem to imply that these men did not think of themselves as acting in accordance with the rule of reciprocal exchange. However, improved material conditions eventually meant that the army finally found themselves in a position to return the favour - as conceived by Trotsky - by offering courses in patriotism to the children of their most enthusiastic sponsors.

47 The army role in education was reaffirmed from 2005 onward, thanks to a second program focusing on patriotic instruction<sup>72</sup>. This subsequent program more explicitly defined the conditions and methods appropriate for the army to exert its influence upon the population (the Ministry of Defence was a full partner in this program along with several other ministries). The program clearly laid out the ideological objective of military *shefstvo*: the army was considered as an agent for promoting ideological aims. The program also lauded the benefits of mutual patronage. Since that time, the army has been actively setting up relations of *shefstvo* all over Russia. In exchange for certain targeted types of aid (such as constructing housing for retired officers), a unit will not only welcome and sponsor recruits coming from its partner city or region, it also proposes sessions of “patriotic education” to the schoolchildren of the area. The process of institutionalising *shefstvo* has been underway since the beginning of the 2000s. Informal during the first moments of its resurgence, *shefstvo* came to be celebrated in various ceremonies honouring its practice. These ceremonies are striking insofar as they display a progressively more ritualized atmosphere. They have become well-publicized occasions which feature the signing of official documents, and in addition to the two signing parties the attendees have tended to include various distinguished public figures and also the media. Since the public announcement of second patriotic program, these ceremonies have been decked out with banners, flags, parades and fanfares.

48 Thus *shefstvo* under Putin has returned to the two original purposes that Trotsky first conceived for it - material and ideological - and has also gained its own ceremonial atmosphere. Its resurgence was made possible by the reactivation of those resilient links, forged in that early period, that serve to connect the people and the army. The emergence of reciprocal conditions

- as part of its actual functioning constitutes an element previously unknown and found only in post-Soviet Russia; it is the result of the public's deep concern for the fate of their children.
- 49 It is difficult to quantify the extent to which *shefstvo* has helped improve the army's standard of living since it reappeared, but it was undoubtedly of vital importance under Yeltsin. In the present day, it has less influence on the material level since the army's situation has generally improved; however, certain problems remain unsolved - the question of housing in particular. *Shefstvo*'s role in maintaining the morale of the troops has certainly been important as well. An analysis of letters written by officers throughout the Yeltsin period - printed in the reader response section of military newspapers - bears witness to this fact: many of them, faced with the abandonment of their unit by the state, did find some consolation in the way the public mobilized to show its support.
- 50 At present, however, there is a tendency for these practices to be institutionalized and camouflaged by official ideology, for they have proven incompatible with the liberal model of government, as well as damaging to the image of a strong state. Thus there is a need to render them formal and invest them with ideological aims. The second program of patriotic education promulgated by Vladimir Putin uses *shefstvo* to this effect, and thus distorts the purpose of material *shefstvo* by ideologizing the phenomenon; an informal practice thus becomes viewed and valued as an act of patriotism.
- 51 This distortion is a logical one insofar as *shefstvo* constitutes not only a marker of the army's standard of living but also a marker of the incapacity of the state to provide for the needs of its citizens.

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### Notes

1 This article was initially published in French in the book *Culture militaire et mobilisation patriotique dans la Russie d'aujourd'hui*, A. Le Huérou & E. Sieca-Kozłowski (Eds), Paris: Karthala, 2008. It has been translated into English for the purpose of this issue by Sharon Joyce.

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### **Abstract**

*Shefstvo*, the creation of patronage relations between units of the armed forces and local governments, is a Russian practice dating back to the 1920s. Though it nearly disappeared at the end of the Soviet era, it re-emerged in the 1990's when rampant inflation, reductions in military spending and embezzlement created problems of catastrophic proportions for the army. Exchange networks of a more or less spontaneous and informal nature grew up between the local authorities and the military units in order to provide the soldiers with material support such as money, food and clothing. When Putin began his second term in office and launched various campaigns promoting patriotism, the nature of these patronage relations underwent a change: the army began to seek sponsors on its own initiative and it also took on the role of public educator. The ideological aspect of *shefstvo* regained fundamental significance.

**Keywords** : Russian Army, Society, Russia, *Shefstvo*, Patronage, Trotsky

**Research Fields** : Sociology

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