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Reflections on Policing in Post-Communist Europe

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Anna Colin Lebedev

## **Armiia i Ia. Materialy sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia, situatsii, pis'ma, vyskazyvaniia. Sankt-Peterburgskaia regional'naia obsestvennaia pravozasitnaia organizatsiia "Soldatskie materi Sankt Peterburga". [The Army And Me. Materials for sociological enquiry, situations, letters, declarations by the "Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg" organisation], Tuskarora, Saint Petersburg, 2003.**

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- 1 Since the first movements were set up in 1989, organisations of soldiers' mothers have, in their daily work, been collecting a unique mass of information on national service conditions and the situation of the Russian army. Of course, this comes from oral accounts by soldiers and their families arriving in their tens every day in different committees throughout Russia, but also from written sources. This takes the form of letters and explicative notes, press articles and photos, even drawings and caricatures, which are an integral part of young recruits' folklore.
- 2 The use made of this type of document by volunteers in the committees of soldiers' mothers is, mostly, somewhat scanty. Essential information gleaned from letters or explicative notes is used to pad out such or such soldier's file. Other, more general documents are sometimes pinned up in the committees' offices but, more often than not, are filed away in no precise aim, through lack of time or means, but also because there is no clear vision of how this kind of account could be used. Under the pressure of daily emergencies, volunteers in the committees of soldiers' mothers rarely have time to study the documents passing through their hands longer than is strictly necessary.
- 3 Nevertheless, accounts by soldiers, conscripts and former soldiers reveal much to the outside reader.
- 4 Although the general problems concerning national service in Russia are often widely known - mistreatment by officers and older soldiers, no respect for soldiers' dignity and integrity, deplorable material conditions - their range and traumatic effect often defy the imagination of anyone who has never been directly confronted with national service.
- 5 It is, therefore, much to the credit of the "Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg" organisation that they have translated general concepts into simple words and lent emotional overtones to hard facts in the book "Armiia I Ia". The documents brought together under this title are very diverse. Firstly, there are accounts or descriptions written specially for the book, both by young soldiers and by older people who served in the Soviet army. But a great deal of room in this collection is given over to documents coming from the activity of soldiers' mothers' organisations : explicative notes written by soldiers about the problems that led them to contact such organisations ; letters requesting help ; letters from young soldiers to their parents, which the latter put up for publication. The authors have finished off the collection with extracts from press articles, interviews with political or military figures as well as the results of a public

opinion poll on the perception of national service, carried out for the Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg.

- 6 It is true that the documents are unequal in their content and interest, and that the book appears as something of a patchwork. This disparate nature does not, however, diminish the value of the book, which does not claim to be as thorough or exhaustive as a university work. The interest of this collection does not lie in its analysis, but in the words of those who agreed to speak of their experience to the volunteers in the Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg organisation, as well as in the authors' conviction that these words are important. The emotion filling most of the accounts and the minor details of soldiers' and officers' daily life tell us more about the reality of national service than any number of analytical articles. In this sense, the step taken by the Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg resembles that of the Bielorrussian author Svetlana Alexievich who, since her first book "War's Unwomanly Face"<sup>1</sup>, has had her heroes speak in the first person singular, real protagonists of a tragic story. As with Alexievich, it is a chorus of human voices and a succession of poignant monologues that we remember most in "Armiia I Ia". If intimate knowledge of a problem is one of the keys to its solution, this collection undoubtedly takes part in the useful task of revealing what life is like behind the doors of Russian barracks.

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### Notes

1 Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1988. See also : *Zinky boys*, W.W. Norton&Company, New York, 1992 ; Chatto&Windue, Londres, 1992. *Voices from Chernobyl. Chronicle of the future*, Aurum Press, Londres, 1999.

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