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Robert V. Barylski

**Stephen L. Webber and Jennifer G. Mathers eds., Military and Society in Post-Soviet Russia. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006, 277 pages.**

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**Robert V. Barylski**

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- 1 In the run up to the July 2006, G-8 summit in St. Petersburg, public opinion leaders in the developed European countries and the United States warned that Russia was backsliding on democratic reform, increasing defense spending rapidly, and using energy blackmail to rebuild power and influence. President George Bush expressed some of the West's concerns to Putin in public and in private meetings. Putin stood his ground and reminded his guests, royally housed in the Petrine imperial setting, that Russia, a sovereign state with a deep and rich history, would rebuild its post-Soviet institutions in keeping with Russian needs and traditions. President Putin added that Russia hoped to avoid the type of democracy the US was building in Iraq.
- 2 What might be called the Putin thesis argues that the chaos of the 1990's did enormous damage to Russian state viability, including the armed services. Democratic and progressive reform require state strengthening, the revival of effective institutions of government; and, in the Russian case, a central government capable of making and implement authoritative decisions. Thus, he argues, the very state strengthening that concerns Western observers is a necessary stage in Russia's reconstruction into a law-governed, civil society. His popularity ratings suggests that some 60-70% of Russians agree with him.
- 3 Thus, as social scientists who study power institutions, we have an interesting challenge. On the one hand, our studies of Russian political culture argue that authoritarian values permeate Russian society. On the other hand, we know that the very gatekeepers of this authoritarian society rejected the corrupt, socialist dictatorship in 1990-1991 and set progressive, European goals for Russia's future development. Thus, the Soviet system generated its own capacity for self-criticism and change and did indeed change. Consequently, in order to understand the current situation and its prospects for progressive development, we have to do more than identify authoritarian continuity. We need to focus on the relationship between pattern maintenance and adaptation to new conditions.
- 4 As social scientists who study power institutions we should have clear, well-substantiated answers to fundamental questions about the direction of Russian military reform, the main problems to be addressed, and the amount of progress made thus far. We should also be able to make predictions and to provide pragmatic advice based upon our theories. Since our work explains how power institutions function under liberal and authoritarian systems, it could be used to develop either type. We use our scholarly journals primarily to advance the liberal arts and sciences and to contribute to the development of knowledge. They also have a secondary function related to policy advocacy although most scholarly journals avoid stating this openly. My reading and evaluation of *The Military and Society in Post-Soviet Russia* will be guided by the traditional scholarly agenda, by an open society agenda, and by my scholarly interest in understanding how progressive reformers emerge and what happens to them.

**Stephen L. Webber's Introduction**

- 5 Webber argues that our studies of civil-military relations were too narrow and we should broaden our analytical frameworks into what he calls a society-military interface model. I

agree with his general point about the specialized studies of civil-military relations but fear that the SMI model he proposes is impractical because it casts too broad a net. Webber explains, “In other words, ‘society-military relations’ refers to all aspects of the interface between civilian society and the military sphere, in the political, economic, social, symbolic and cultural realms. (page 3)” To complete this vast research agenda, he would need to produce a multi-volume encyclopedia of society-military relations in Russia. Who would assemble these trees into an understandable model of the forest? Arguably, Webber should simplify his model and explain more clearly how it will be used for longitudinal studies. This might be accomplished by identifying stages of society-military relations development, a revision that needs a general theory of the direction in which European society-military relations are moving.

6 Webber is heading in that direction when he explains that the SMI model focuses on militarism, militarization and the society-military relationship (pages 12-15). He places the Russian case within the larger study of the demilitarization of European society, a theme he returns to in Chapter 7., where he and Alina Zilberman address Martin Shaw’s *Post-Military Society: Militarism, Demilitarization and War at the End of the Twentieth Century*.

7 The book’s Introduction also contains a good discussion of our field’s evolution over the past several decades. However, the SMI model it advocates is still a work in progress; and, as the editors explain, the book’s chapters were not required to address it. Thus, we need to evaluate the chapters individually, on their own merits, rather than as specific parts of a larger SMI project.

### Can Russian Society be Demilitarized?

8 Lev Gudkov argues that the Soviet Union was a highly militarized society because military-like values permeated civilian and military institutional life.<sup>1</sup> His insights are consistent with the classical literature on totalitarian mobilization regimes: “The imperatives of universal mobilization became the principles for the organization of daily life... (page 47).” The Soviet experience produced an authoritarian political culture and social science predicts that societies infused with authoritarian institutions and values cannot be quickly transformed into liberal democratic, civil societies. Gudkov’s research confirms the existence of major residues of support for non-liberal values in Russian society at large and in the power institutions in particular. Since Gudkov spent decades building Russia’s ability to study public opinion objectively, his findings merit careful attention.

9 Gudkov argues that as a result of the Chechen wars, “Russia’s generals have gained unprecedented political influence (page 50).” The movement of military and FSB officers into public leadership roles, according to Gudkov, is natural given Russia’s authoritarian political culture and the public’s deep insecurity Russia’s economic and political viability. Thus, public trust in the power institutions is high, far higher than in civilian political leaders and institutions such as the Duma (page 51). Further, the old Soviet defensive consciousness survives and reproduces itself as suspicion of NATO and the West (page 52).

10 Gudkov’s conclusions and predictions are conservative. Societal and institutional inertia prevent the Russian armed forces from being transformed into modern, professional armed forces of the Western European type. More attention should be given to the explanation of why solid members of the Soviet Communist Party rejected their own corrupt “militarized” system and repudiated it. Otherwise, we and Russia remain trapped in a permanent authoritarian syndrome. Is that indeed the case?

### The Russian Media and Military Reform

11 Bettina Renz argues that societal and institutional inertia--Russia’s authoritarian legacy actively resists independent media efforts to perform the watchdog functions needed in an open society. The power institutions want the media to educate the public in ways reminiscent of the Soviet era. Renz makes the classical arguments for a free press as an indispensable

part of the institutional architecture of open society, one of the “mechanisms for holding state officials to account for their exercise of power (page 62).”

12 Renz studied diverse responses to dedovshchina to make her point that the power institutions resent negative investigative reporting. She explains that conservative authorities make the classical arguments against alleged reporting excesses which undermine society’s trust in the armed forces and make military reform all the more difficult.

13 Renz points out that the flowering of press freedoms enjoyed during the first half of the 1990’s was partly the result of general institutional disorientation. Thus, it was perhaps the chaos rather than Boris Eltsin’s commitment to liberal values that created the space for a very diverse, free press. But, when the power institutions began to recover, they imposed the expected institutional discipline on their own publications, *Krasnaya zvezda*, for example and became more fastidious about controlling information flows. Renz shows that Vladimir Putin has expressed support for the free press but has also given very clear signals that his preference is for constructive, patriotic criticism, a media that helps educate and shape public opinion in support of national leadership. I agree with her conclusion that access to security and military information is once again tightly controlled but that the Russian media made substantial progress since the 1980’s. Russian society now has access to independent analysis, including “watchdog” analysis of military affairs.

14 Yet, even open societies have problems with their respective power institutions. Further, Western civil-military relations theory argues that military officers should stay out of politics and policy debates. Active duty officers, as a matter of professional discipline, do not communicate openly with reporters. There is no easy solution to this problem. Military discipline tends to trump glasnost’ and civilian primacy tends to stifle military participation in policy debates. Even open societies have closed sectors.

### Post-Soviet Russian War Films

15 David Gillespie’s chapter on war films reminds us that the arts play an important role in giving voice to ideas and to shaping public opinion about the armed forces, military history, and specific wars.<sup>2</sup> It is refreshing to read Gillespie because his style is rooted in the discourse of the humanities and quite free from the deadening social science jargon that turns the general public away from much of our scholarly work. He covers an astonishing array of films and demonstrates convincingly that there is tremendous artistic diversity in post-Soviet Russia, diversity that reflects the country’s enormously complex and often contradictory reactions to war in general and the battle for the North Caucasus in particular.

16 Western public opinion has from the outset sympathized with the Chechen separatists and favored independent film makers who take that point of view. But the situation in Russia is far different; and, from my perspective, better attuned to the tragedy unfolding there. Gillespie reminds us that extreme Russian patriotic nationalists have their favorite war films. However, there is far more to the Russian movie front than neo-fascism. Postmodern philosophical travelers have their own versions of the conflict. In addition, there are well-made historical movies about the battles of the nineteenth century. Gillespie ends his brief chapter with a discussion of Andrei Konchalovskii’s film, *The House of Fools*, a surrealist masterpiece which reveals the lunacy of it all. Its message: “War is madness, and only the lunatics seem to know any semblance of order, routine and normality (page 91).”

### Political Uses of National Insecurity

17 Mikhail Alexseev’s chapter shows how Eltsin and Putin exploited national insecurity to win public support for premeditated constitutional changes that enhanced the power and authority of the presidency.<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Putin argues that without political recentralization and state strengthening, democracy will fail. First create a strong viable state and then democratize it--this is his main political thesis. Alexseev shows how Eltsin and Putin used windows

of opportunity created by the Chechen wars and various terrorist incidents to advance this program.

18 The trends which Alexseev discusses became even more pronounced in 2005 when Vladimir Putin used the public's reaction to terrorist incidents to win Duma approval for an enormously important change in the way Russians elect the governors of the federal regions. The Duma replaced the direct popular election of governors with a system of indirect elections in which the president nominates candidates to the regional legislatures. Additionally, he created special counter terrorism units with the power to find and liquidate terrorists in the southern federal district. Thus, although these changes took place after the chapter was written they are predicted by the chapter's main thesis.

19 Alexseev argues that Putin and others have exploited the sense of insecurity created by terrorist attacks and the warfare in the North Caucasus to enhance their powers and to insulate the power ministries from troublesome democratic oversight and to avoid fundamental military reform (page 111). I think Putin would argue that the Chechen wars actually forced the civilian leadership to address the collapse of the Soviet military and to take action to produce more effective military forces. Both views are correct. Some reforms were delayed but others were pushed forward.

### Rebuilding Reliable Control

20 Pavel Baev's chapter examines the reform problem in greater depth.<sup>4</sup> In my book I argued that Boris Eltsin's 1993 constitution made the military and the other power ministries presidential armed forces because it gives the president the power to appoint and dismiss all top commanders without parliamentary review.<sup>5</sup> Thus, one would expect the military would cater to the presidency which controls the rewards system. This system gives the president too much authority and prevents the Duma from functioning as an effective check and balance.

21 However, in reality, presidential power has not been able to achieve the reformist goals Russia's presidents have set for the armed forces. Russian presidents have been embarrassed and frustrated by military institutional behavior. One embarrassing piece of information after another hit the headlines, everything from gross corruption and conscripts who died from neglect to the sinking of the nuclear submarine, the Kursk. Real world performance did not fit the idea; in reality, the commander in chief could not effect basic reforms. People could be fired but firings did not correct the chronic problems.

22 Baev's chapters offers some insights into real world Russian institutional inertia. The armed forces are presidential but the presidents have delivered what it takes. The military simply does not trust the presidents to provide the support required to maintain basic systems let alone to modernize them. Boris Eltsin's failure to provide enough funding to pay for basic salaries and operating costs forced the Russian military to develop coping habits that undermined centralized command-and-control. Powerful regional governors began to make up the difference and to develop special relationships with regional commanders. Baev explains, "The combination of starvation, identity crisis and professional cultural conflict strongly pushed the military towards the regions, where dynamic economic process went hand in hand with political sovereignisation and identity building (page 119)."

23 (Krasnaia zvezda regularly praised civilian patrons who sent supplies and funds to Russian bases. Led by the intrepid mayor, Iuri Luzhkov, the city of Moscow adopted the Russian Black Sea fleet, for example. All across the country, military base by military base, deals were worked out between commanding officers and local political and business leaders to help the military make ends meet. In exchange, the military sometimes provided labor and other services. Oddly enough, collaboration between local commanders and regional leaders was standard practice under Communist Party dictatorship and this Soviet habit helped the military to survive the post-Soviet economic crisis. Further, the military ran its own network of collective farms and was used to breaking formal rules to solve operational problems.

Few Western studies of Soviet civil-military relations have understood these complexities. However, these practices did not threaten centralized control until the 1990's.)

24 This dangerous trend could not be reversed until the federal government and the president had the funds to support the armed forces properly. During Putin's first term, as Baev explains, the country's financial situation changed and the president began the process of rebuilding the military chain of command and federal administrative authority over the regions. Arguably, this supports Putin's thesis that the state must first be rebuilt and then democratized. The data Baev provides demonstrate that central control and internal discipline were breaking down during the 1990's.

## Military Reform, and the Challenge of Broadening Access to Policy Making

25 Julian Cooper's chapter addresses at least two key issues, economic dimensions of military reform and executive domination of policy making. Cooper reminds us that Mikhail Gorbachev began cutting defense spending and calling for military reform well before the chaotic changes of the 1990's.<sup>6</sup> The huge cuts that hit all across the Russian defense establishment were catastrophic and deeply wrenching to millions of military personnel, defense workers, and their families. Cooper provides some excellent data. For example, defense industry employment dropped by two-thirds from 1990 to 2001. The younger more talented employees fled for better jobs and the mean age of employees jumped from 39 to 58 (page 133).

26 Arguably, the social contract between the civilian political leadership and the defense establishment was stretched to the breaking point because the former could not meet its financial obligations towards the armed forces and the defense contractors. Instead of reform, Russian defense had to cope with near disaster. Once the fiscal crisis passed, Russian leaders could begin to address military reform and military accountability to elected officials more calmly. Cooper does an excellent job explaining the accountability issues, especially the Duma's efforts to exert influence over budget and policy formation. He also touches on problems the executive branch has with defense spending oversight and accountability. He notes the emergence of independent, non-governmental, civilian expertise in defense affairs and other signs that the society-military interface is slowly moving closer towards a middle ground between the closed Soviet system and the European open society ideal. This is the story of a long "uphill struggle" against well-entrenched national habits. Cooper concludes that more prodding from the international community is required to promote greater transparency.

27 I wish Cooper had also addressed how the huge economic gap between Russia's military professionals and the business tycoons affects military morale and trust between military and business elites. The Russian military has remained the most poorly paid, housed, and supported of all the major European armed forces. Similarly, much of Russian society is extremely poor by general European standards. By contrast, the Russian business community boasts several dozen billionaires and hundreds if not thousands of millionaires. In many ways, the Russian civilian business elites have caught up to and even surpassed their Western counterparts in personal riches and lavish life styles. Under these conditions, the Russian military can neither recruit nor retain the high quality personnel required to bring the Russian armed forces up to the Western European standard. If this situation tends to alienate the military officers from the civilian elites, it is fundamentally unhealthy for democratic stability.

## Societal Pressure Changed Russian Draft Policy

28 Stephen Webber and Alina Zilberman begin by raising a number of interesting theoretical questions about the demilitarization of European societies and the Russian case.<sup>7</sup> They also sort through some contradictory data. On the one hand, as Gudkov reported, Russian society

has a high level of trust in power institutions, especially the presidency and the military. On the other hand, some 90% of all Russian youth avoid military service and there was a widespread rebellion against the draft. By disaggregating the public opinion data, the authors show that the older generation carried the most positive views of the military while the younger generation had rather different ideas.

29 What is most interesting is the manner in which the Russian state responded to societal criticism. Vladimir Putin presided over major changes in the military draft. He adopted a plan to cut the period of service from two years to just one year. He implemented new educational and other incentives. He supported the shift towards military professionalization and a complex set of contracts for service. The chapter was written as these reforms were beginning to gain traction. Thus, pressure from society on the state brought changes, reforms that moved Russia a bit closer to the European mainstream. This is neither democratic governance nor true civilian control but it is a sign that the Russian state is more responsive to societal opinion than in the past, a positive development. The institutionalization of democratic societal control would require changes in the Eltsin constitution.

### Women in Uniform

30 Chapter by chapter, the evidence builds that traditional Russo-Soviet authoritarian values are evident in all dimensions of society-military relations but that some progressive reforms have taken place. Jennifer Mathers reviews the evidence on the gender front and finds that Russian society is decades behind Western Europe.<sup>8</sup> Although about 10% of the Russian army's uniformed personnel are women, they are assigned to a narrow set of positions which Russian society identifies as appropriate for women. The type of gender differentiation that was normal in Western armed services some thirty to fifty years ago is the current Russian practice and there is no influential movement to alter it. Further, the higher military leadership positions are still almost exclusively the male domain. Further, it appears that Russian men and women still hold very traditional views of gender roles. Mathers does a fine job summarizing and evaluating the available data.

31 One is forced to conclude that the seventy years of Soviet "revolutionary" government actually retarded Russia's modernization by preserving sexist authoritarian patterns of behavior and values more typical of late nineteenth European society. Although Russia is a traditional society, it is plagued by some very modern, complex problems. Our models have trouble capturing the bizarre Russian toleration for mixing pre modern and postmodern values. Perhaps this is because we tend to ignore such contradictions in Western society.

### Traditional Maternal Activism

32 Valerie Zawilski's chapter analyzes and explains the origin, development, and impact the committees of soldiers mothers (CSMs) had on military reform.<sup>9</sup> The CSM data force Western Europeans and North Americans to examine their simplistic views of Russian society and to make room for traditional maternal political activism by mothers who challenged and defied the Russian military, especially the draft boards, in order to force the system to address serious deficiencies. Bit by bit the authorities officially adopted the main reforms the CSMs demanded: a new system of draft deferrals, an end to sending raw recruits into dangerous combat, more attention to the *dedovshchina* problem, better diets for draftees, etc. Thus, Russian women--mothers and others, accomplished important reforms in a male dominated society's most stereotypically male institution, the armed forces. Democratic initiative influenced policy development in the Russian military. This fact should make us question our simplistic models of the Russian military as closed to society.

33 Zawilski demonstrates that CSM activism is not to be confused with modern European feminism. Although some elements in the CSM community had "leftist" ideological views that could be seen as anti-military, others were quite willing to cooperate with military authorities

to bolster military reform. Thus, women were able to influence Russian policy development within a traditional Russian sexist framework. Zawilski argues that such a sexist Russian framework actually gave the women some political space and compelled their critics to hold their punches. Mature Russian mothers, even grandmothers, have a special status in Russian society.

34 During the tumultuous 1990's, the power institutions were more unstable and more permeable than during the 1980's. Advocates of democratic initiative are starting to look back on the 1990's with nostalgia. Russia's post-Soviet Time of Troubles was highly creative. Some argue that windows of opportunity are now closing as the power institutions recover and rebuild. However, the fact that much of the CSM reform program became official government policy is cause for optimism.

## The Cossack Revival

35 Elizabeth Sieca-Kozłowski's chapter examines the latest state in the long history of Russia's Cossack communities, especially those in the North Caucasus between the Black and Caspian Seas.<sup>10</sup> Her analysis supports the larger thesis concerning the special qualities of the 1990's, a period characterized by unusually high levels of public initiative and confusion about the lines of authority within and among power institutions and between power institutions and society at large. Further, her work on the Cossacks also touches on much larger questions about post-Soviet Russia's basic identity and new national symbolism.

36 Boris Eltsin adopted Russian imperial symbolism and replaced the hammer and sickle with the imperial double-headed eagle. All post-Soviet power institutions now serve under the double-headed eagle.<sup>11</sup> Does this mean that the modern Russian state is prepared to revive the imperial Russian Cossack tradition? If so, Russia would be building power institutions that defy modern ideas about military professionalism. This would be a major deviation from the strategic reform direction the Russian state adopted when it declared that its goal was to create modern, professional armed forces.

37 The author provides excellent insights into the Russian state's efforts to institutionalize--coopt and control the Cossack revival. After all, no modern state can permit armed militias to develop and operate outside governmental control. The monopoly on coercive power is one of the primary measures of state viability. During the 1990's Russia was losing control over armed force, a process that had to be reversed. However, once the crisis period passed, it was time to impose discipline and to bring all organized armed force under central control, including the Cossacks. The author's evidence indicates that this process is incomplete.

38 In addition to command and control concerns, the Kremlin has ideological and ethno-national concerns about Cossack revival. Sieca-Kozłowski emphasizes that traditional Cossack, Russian Orthodox nationalism has been rejected as Russian state ideology. Russia is officially a multinational and multiconfessional state; therefore, Russia's power institutions cannot openly embrace traditional Cossack ideology. The politically correct, post-Soviet Cossack is supposed to defend the Russian Federation's multinational state and multiconfessional ideals. The traditional view of the Cossacks as imperial Russian policeman is politically counterproductive. The Russian state channels Cossack community activism into positive channels, activities ranging from caring for orphans to encouraging youth to prepare for military service and to serving as auxiliary armed forces. Nevertheless, the author correctly argues that historically powerful symbols of Russian statehood and culture such as the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia's Cossacks have currency. On state occasions Russia's presidents proudly display various cavalry units, including Cossacks. (To date, I have not heard of any Muslim Tatar elite troops on parade in Moscow although that may well come next as political correctness works its way from Kazan to the Kremlin.) Although the post-Soviet, Russian state and its power institutions proclaim that Russia is a multinational and

multiconfessional state, traditional great Russian patriotism is the prevailing “unofficial” ideology and its symbols are widely displayed.

## Conclusion and Reflections

- 39 I find myself in general agreement with the book’s Conclusion, written by Jennifer G. Mathers. She states that the chapters provide a wealth of information but neither apply nor test and criticize the SMI model. She therefore provides summaries of each chapter and some general comments about broad changes in the society-military equation. She concludes, “there are unmistakable signs of a shift in its balance.” Although the shift is towards the modern European open society relations, Russian society is still far from that goal. I would argue that we need clearer benchmarks and standards for measuring progress towards that goal. We also need to address the Putin thesis that state strengthening is an integral part of progressive reform and that without it Russia could not develop into a modern democratic state.
- 40 During the 1990’s when I wrote *The Soldier in Russian Politics*, I was especially interested in progressive officers who wanted to bring their country and the Russian military into the European mainstream. I was also fascinated by some prominent, responsible conservative officers whose insights into the challenges the country faced had turned out to be quite perceptive. Russia had and still has progressive military professionals. There was and still is intelligent progressive life inside the military’s “authoritarian” institutions. The same must be said about the KGB; and Putin is a good example of this. Thus, I was pleased to see Webber and Zilberman discussing Lopatin, Rokhlin, and others (pp. 194-195) and beginning to develop the discourse about how reformers inside and outside the power institutions interact. Julian Cooper’s chapter also provides interesting information about this issue. We need to continue to build our understanding of how and why support for progressive change develops within authoritarian society and its most authoritarian institutions.
- 41 *Military and Society in Post-Soviet Russia* is a solid contribution to the field. It provides rich interdisciplinary insights into society-military relations during a period when Russian power institutions were struggling to recover their corporate viability and emerging from the travails of the 1990’s.

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### Notes

- 1 Lev Gudkov, Chapter 1, “The army as an institutional model;” pages 39-63.
- 2 David Gillespie, Chapter 3, “Confronting imperialism: the ambivalence of war in post-Soviet film.”
- 3 Mikhail A. Alexseev, Chapter 4, “Back to hell: civilian-military ‘audience costs’ and Russia’s wars in Chechnya.
- 4 Pavel Baev, Chapter 5., “Military reform and regional politics.”
- 5 See Chapter 17, “The Theory and Practice of Democratic Constitutional Control,” in Robert V. Barylski, *The Soldier in Russian Politics: Duty, Dictatorship, and Democracy Under Gorbachev and Eltsin*; Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick and London, 1998.
- 6 Julian Cooper, “Society-military relations in Russia: the economic dimension.”
- 7 Stephen L. Webber and Alina Zilberman, Chapter 7, “The citizenship dimension of the society-military interface.”
- 8 Jennifer G. Mathers, Chapter 8, “Women, society and the military: Women soldiers in post-Soviet Russia.”
- 9 Valerie Zawilski, Chapter 9, “saving Russia’s sons: the Soldiers’ Mothers and the Russian-Chechen wars.”
- 10 Elizabeth Sieca-Kozlowski, Chapter 10, “The integration of the Cossacks within the Russian Army: political and military implications.”
- 11 See Chapter 18, “Serving Under the Imperial Eagle” in R. V. Barylski , *Op. cit.*

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