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## Veterans' Policy in Russia: a Puzzle of Creation

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# Veterans' Policy in Russia: a Puzzle of Creation

## Veterans' policy: theoretical framework

- 1 The issue of the treatment of veterans is a new subject for academic research in post-communist countries. In these countries all aspects of society-military relations, including veterans' policy, were a restricted area for public discussion and academic interest in previous years. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the longest Soviet War in Afghanistan (1979-1989), this area of study has become a legitimate field of study in Russia. Veterans' problems have been broadly discussed in the media and by the public, but seldom by scholars. The purpose of this paper is to examine the Soviet and Russian experience of veterans' policy, to analyze its hidden machinery and to identify the different circumstances which created the Russian version of a veterans' policy.
- 2 A starting point for the study of veterans' policy is a review of military legislation. Such legislation defines the position of a veteran at different times, determines what kind of groups of ex-service personnel are considered as veterans and how the state determines a veteran's right to privileges, and so on. In this case, the definitions suggested by Christopher Dandeker and colleagues to answer, "the fundamental underlying question is, what is a "veteran" or what kind of groups are included in this category of ex-service personnel"<sup>2</sup>, will be applied in the proposed paper for examination the Soviet and Russian veterans' policy.
- 3 Based on different definitions of who is a veteran, sociologists have identified two types of veterans' policy: inclusive and exclusive. "The most inclusive is based on receiving a day's military pay (whether or not one has met the training requirements or serving on a deployment or seeming action), and the most exclusive requires personnel to have undertaken some kind of active service"<sup>3</sup>. This study argues that the unsuitability of terming Britain's policy exclusive is explained by an absence of exclusivity of military service because of the shared experience of civilians and military during the world wars and a national pattern of civil-military relations with a long history of keeping an all-volunteer army. The British scholars state that countries which send large numbers of service personnel abroad during wars and military operations create an exclusive veterans' policy, because these countries need to make an investment in remembering and valuing the military contributions. This paper proposes another explanation why a country might opt for an exclusive veterans' policy by using the Russian veterans' policy as an example. The main idea is that exclusive veterans' policy may be a consequence of three factors: the political situation, a specific pattern of civil-military relations and the social welfare system.

## Exclusiveness of veterans' policy in the Soviet Union

- 4 The important features of the Soviet pattern of civil-military relations were militarization of society and the ideological character of military professionalism. Society's militarization was a result of the conscript system, whereby military service was "a sacred duty and honorable obligation of every Soviet citizen"<sup>4</sup>. Some scholars suggest that this aspect of the Soviet life is relevant for modern Russia<sup>5</sup>. Apart from the militarization of the Soviet society, scholars underline the ideological (subjective) nature of civil-military relations in the Soviet Union. Samuel Huntington, the classic writer on civil-military studies, was the first to highlight the 'subjective' nature of the Soviet pattern of civil-military relations<sup>6</sup>. He suggests that the Soviet military was a "mirror of politics" because it was placed under the command of the Communist

Party. His statement, however, has been reconsidered by other scholars who indicate the limits of Huntington's objective-subjective dilemma, especially in the case of the Soviet Union. They suggest it is more appropriate to analyse the Soviet type of civil-military relations using "mutual benefit", "institutional interpenetration" models and a model of symbioses between the military, party and society<sup>7</sup>. According to these models, the party supported the military and provided soldiers and veterans with privileges in order to enhance the current political regime, to guarantee their loyalty and support in all political initiatives. Following this idea, the preferred status of veterans of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) could be also considered as a consequence of this reciprocal contract between the Communist Party, the military and Soviet society.

- 5 The creation of the preferred status of veterans began after the end of the Great Patriotic War when approximately 8.5 million soldiers were discharged from the Soviet army. Veterans were entitled to employment and education privileges. Wounded and disabled soldiers obtained a onetime cash-compensation and a pension. However, the serious changes in veterans' welfare took place only in the beginning of the 1960s. At this time the leaders of the Soviet Union developed the veterans' policy as an instrument to enhance public, military and state interrelations, to provide veterans' support for the current political actions. Thus, veterans became eligible for an impressive set of privileges in health provision, housing, transports, tax, nursing care allowance for the severely disabled, including an automobile free of charge (model: Zaporozhets) with free service and payment for gasoline. Public transportation was free for veterans as well as a one-year trip to a health resort. They were entitled to telephones installed for free, to buy groceries at special stores and to have them delivered, and they were first in line to purchase scarce goods<sup>8</sup>. Veterans were also the first citizens on the waiting list to get a flat or to build a house. This was the most valuable privilege in the Soviet Union. Thus, veterans of the Great Patriotic War had a preferred status in the Soviet welfare system. Their provision was the most diverse and developed. They obtained extensive support from the Soviet state and the state expected loyalty from them as part of their "reciprocal contract".
- 6 This "special relations" between veterans and the Soviet state was also supported by the social welfare system. According to research conducted by Western scholars, the Soviet welfare system was characterized by its "replacement of market instruments of social regulations by ideological mechanism of reproducing social inequality"<sup>9</sup>. The Soviet state declared universal social provision, but created "a model of social welfare which is based in large measure on the principles of work-performance, achievement and meritocratic selection"<sup>10</sup>. There are many terms for the Soviet welfare system, for example, "a bureaucratic state collectivist system of welfare", "paternalistic state" and "anti-liberal, hierarchical, conservative and corporative welfare state"<sup>11</sup>. In essence, they mean that the level and forms of rewarding loyalty to the State depended on ideological estimation of citizens' merits. Thus, it is clear that veterans of the Great Patriotic War were only one part of this system; they were rewarded according to political needs.
- 7 The only problem with this system of veterans' policy was how to reward participants of other wars and operations. Two approaches were applied in Soviet military law. The first one meant that ex-soldiers were considered as "veterans" of the Great Patriotic War; according to the law they became veterans of the Great Patriotic War. The other group of ex-service personnel who were deployed in operations during the long post-war era could not be veterans at all. Only one War and one group of Veterans were catered for in the Soviet military legislation, namely the Great Patriotic War and the Veterans of the Great Patriotic War. Thus, the Soviet state created a "true" exclusive veterans' policy affiliating the status of "Veteran" with one group of ex-service personnel. The Soviet Afghan War, however, brought about a breakdown of this "clear" system of veterans' policy and highlighted obvious differences among the veterans' population.

## Stratification of veterans in modern Russia

- 8 Before the ongoing operations in the Chechen Republic, the Soviet Afghan War was the longest operation undertaken by the Soviet Union. The “Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces”, the name for the Soviet army in Afghanistan, was in Afghanistan for nine years, one month and nineteenth days. The declared goal of the Soviet incursion into the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was “peace-making operation and protection of Afghani people from possible aggressive invasion”. This explanation concealed the geopolitical interest of the Soviet Union in the region. According to official sources, 620 000 Soviet soldiers and 21 000 civilians were deployed in the Afghan operation<sup>12</sup>. However, it is still difficult to understand the exact number of casualties of Soviet personnel killed. This information was changed a few times after the end of war. After the end of the war (15 February 1989), the Soviet Union claimed a death toll of 12 854 soldiers and 1 979 officers, and 35 478 wounded in action, 330 people, including 21 officers were taken prisoner or declared missing in action<sup>13</sup>. Afterwards, the number of total casualties of the Soviet army grew to 15 051 people<sup>14</sup>. In addition, approximately 400 000 Soviet soldiers suffered from disease and non-fatal wounds, and of these one-quarter had infectious hepatitis. According to some sources, more than 11 000 soldiers became disabled after the Afghan operation<sup>15</sup>.
- 9 During and after the Soviet Afghan war, social welfare for ex-soldiers changed more than once. The most important changes constitute four steps in the provision for ex-participants of this war. These stages were defined on the basis of an analysis of their status in military legislation and the type of their welfare provision.

### “No war, No special benefits” in 1979-1983

- 10 There were very few official reports about Afghanistan at this time. In official reports, there were stories about the long struggle of the Afghan people against several imperialistic invasions supported by the Americans, the British and the Pakistani army and the unselfish and valuable help of the Soviet Union<sup>16</sup>. The results of the Soviet civil specialists' work that helped to build the new socialist future of Afghanistan were also discussed in the newspapers. The role of the Soviet soldiers was not presented. Very seldom could there be found any comments on how the Soviet soldiers assisted the Afghani people in civil activities; how their help was important in building houses, delivery goods, health service and just incidentally in fighting against bandits (*basmachei*). Thus, the Soviet state tried to conceal the military details of this operation. Ex-participants of the war were named as “ex-service personnel”; they were discharged with documents which only stated the number of their military unit.
- 11 The position of the Soviet state towards discharged personnel can be contrasted with the soldiers' military and political training before deployment in Afghanistan. This can be illustrated by a typical citation: “The political officer gave the lecture about the international situation: he told us that Soviet forces had forestalled the American Green Berets airborne invasion of Afghanistan by just one hour. It was so incessantly drummed into us that this was a sacred ‘international duty’ that eventually we believed it”<sup>17</sup>. Hence, military service in Afghanistan was presented as a sacred international duty which had a lot in common with the duty of their fathers, the veterans of the Great Patriotic War. But this “international sacred duty” was not rewarded at all. The military duty in Afghanistan was partly recognized only if the soldiers were wounded or disabled. In these cases they were given the status of a disabled Veteran of the Great Patriotic War. Otherwise, participants of the war were considered to be “ex-service personnel” without any special status. This situation was painful and unjust to the ex-participants of the operation, because their experience in Afghanistan was not acknowledged by the state.

## “A Sacred International Duty” in 1983-1991

- 12 By 1983, four years after the beginning of the war, soldiers, workers and government personnel who were deployed in the war had special rights to privileges. Their rights were declared by a Special Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Council of Ministers<sup>18</sup>. According to this Resolution, participants of the Afghan operation had the right to privileges in reward for “successful achievement of the special tasks of the Soviet government”. The term for the participants of the war was changed. They became “ex-service personnel, who served in the Limited Contingent of the Soviet Forces and had been temporarily stationed in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan”. The terms “temporarily” and “had been stationed” underline the temporary character of the Soviet operation as well as the transient nature of the special privileges of its participants.
- 13 On the basis of the Resolution, ex-soldiers were entitled to special pensions and privileges to health, housing and transport services. The general structure of their privileges was the same as those of the veterans of the Great Patriotic War. Wounded and disabled soldiers received a onetime cash-compensation for wounds or service-connected disability. Further, entitlements meant that wounded ex-soldiers were allowed to spend a month in a military sanatorium. Paid treatment and a onetime monetary compensation were the most popular benefits among ex-participants of the war as they could be claimed almost automatically. The success of these schemes was explained by their direct affiliation to the armed forces. Claiming the other privileges was a far more difficult task. The problem resulted from an unclear policy mechanism to provide the Afghan soldiers' privileges. It was difficult to understand who exactly was responsible for the support of the Afghan soldiers. The indifference of local authorities to soldiers' queries was exemplified in a typical statement: “Well, we did not send you to Afghanistan”. The Soviet society partly shared this opinion. The special rights of the Afghan war soldiers to the same respect and privileges as the veterans of the Great Patriotic War was in question all the time.
- 14 The problem was that a lot of laws which guaranteed a large number of privileges to various groups of Soviet people were passed at the end of the 1980s. This was the logical result of the development of the Soviet welfare system. In this situation, the most difficult task was to obtain the privilege of housing support, because in this case ex-Afghan war soldiers were at the end of a long queue of people who needed to be rewarded. Sometimes they did not have the strength to struggle for their privileges and committed suicide about which there were several stories in the newspapers<sup>19</sup>. In one story the head of the factory's trade union said: “I can understand why he did this. When he was in Afghanistan he was fed with promises of a mountain of gold on returning, but the factory cannot provide him with a house right now. He was included on the list, but before him were a lot of very deserving people such as veterans of the Great Patriotic War, disabled veterans, workers with the long record of work at the factory and ex-Afghan soldiers who came years before him, well...”<sup>20</sup>.
- 15 Public discussion about the legitimacy of the Afghan war and the quite doubtful status of its participants did not prevent the government from having the intention to support them. Consequently, participants were rewarded with new privileges but there was no improvement in the whole policy implementation mechanism. Only at the end of the war in 1989 were the problems of the veterans' welfare beginning to be discussed. Government officials gave public recommendations on the veteran's welfare system, including welfare for ex-Afghan soldiers. The media was overloaded with reports, letters and complaints about the ineffective mechanism for obtaining benefits, as well as the general indifference of both government and society towards ex-Afghan war soldiers' needs. According to a survey printed in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* in 1989, 71% of ex-soldiers considered that the “benefits were only on paper”<sup>21</sup>.

16 Major political change, *perestroika* and *glasnost*, resulted in a transformation of the public image of the ex-Afghan soldiers and converted the meaning of the Soviet Afghan operation. At the end of the 1980s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was acknowledged as a mistake of the Soviet government. Consequently, the participants of the war were named as war criminals, killers and victims of the last Soviet war. The end of the war coincided with the general breakdown of the Soviet Union that led to a chain reaction of rash political and economical reforms which radically changed all aspects of the Soviet life, including, the lives of the Afghan war soldiers.

### “The New State and the New Social Policy” or benefits for veterans’ organizations in 1991-1995

17 The legal terminology for the ex-Afghan war soldiers did not change until 1995, but the welfare system to provide their privileges changed in principle. At the beginning of the 1990s, rapid political, economic and social changes necessitated welfare reform. A new type of social policy was the result of mixing ideas from the Soviet past and from the post-Soviet era to incorporate ideas of market economy and classical liberalism. The Russian government tried to rebuild the state mechanisms and compensated for the lack of reforms by increasing expenditure on social needs. However, this policy was not effective in the face of the high level of inflation. Some experts believe that this problem is typical for all transitional states which try to replace a planned economy with a market economy<sup>22</sup>. A new indirect mechanism to realize social policy was introduced. This meant that the state planned to share responsibility with nongovernmental organizations; in other words, to give them tax benefits and require them to support people in need. Afghan war organizations seemed suitable in this respect, because their motto was “Help yourself and help those who cannot help themselves!”<sup>23</sup>.

18 Privileges were granted one by one to three large veterans’ organizations: the Union of Afghan Veterans, the Russian Union of Afghan war veterans and the Russian Fund for Disabled Afghan War Veterans. All benefits were passed by Presidential Decrees and signed personally by the new President of the Russian Federation, Boris Eltsin. According to these decrees, the Russian state gave an enormous grant to ex-Afghan war soldiers to support their financial, business and industrial activities<sup>24</sup>. Veterans’ organizations were not alone in the list of grant holders. Some non-government organizations such as the National Sport Association, the Hockey Association and a selection of NGOs working with disabled people were also recipients, but their benefits were far lower.

19 It is interesting to note that organizations for the Great Patriotic War veterans were excluded from this system. Their social welfare was in crisis by the end of the 1990s, even though most of the veterans’ privileges that applied during the Soviet period were supposed to be in force all this time. But until the end of the 1990s they were not properly provided for<sup>25</sup>. One explanation for the reduction in the support of the veterans is the breakdown of the Soviet system of civil-military relations and a breach of all the points in the previous “reciprocal contract” between the party, the Soviet state, military, and society.

20 The first years of the new state was a very difficult time in Russian political history. As many experts such as Brian Taylor have said: “The problem in the defense policy realm, then, is not whether the army is under civilian control, but whose control. The political system created in the last decade of democratization is sometimes referred to as ‘super-presidential’ due to the considerable power vested in the office of the presidency”<sup>26</sup>. Boris Eltsin was the head of the state as well as the Supreme Commander in Chief of the Russian Armed Forces. He created “patronage-based” institutions where the appointment of senior officers and key personnel into decision-making bodies was controlled by a “patron”. A strong executive leadership was created by “buying” loyalty and cooperation in exchange for promotion and opportunities<sup>27</sup>. Some of the leaders of the veterans’ organizations exchanged their loyalty to the President’s

family or to high-level politicians for the new privileges. Most likely it was a contract with mutual benefit. The position of the Afghan war soldiers gave them a chance to be included in the complicated political life of the new Russia. From that point on, they could exchange ideological support for “real” market value. They did not need ideology any more; they needed power and money. Unfortunately, only a small group of the veterans’ leadership could be included in the fight for the Soviet inheritance. Privileges which were given to veterans’ organizations did not work as instruments to support veterans in need. The government audit of activity of the Russian Fund for Disabled Afghan War Veterans presented this very clearly. Only 24% - or according to some sources only 9% - of the fund income had been transmitted to rehabilitation and reintegration programs<sup>28</sup>.

- 21 The failure of the new policy project became obvious in the middle of the 1990s. A programme of government expenditure was launched. This was reflected in the cancellation of veterans’ benefits. Thus, this process can be considered to be a consequence of the consolidation and reinforcement of the Russian state. Other reasons for the cancellation of veterans’ benefits were popular in public and media reports. According to the most controversial version, a key reason for this cancellation was the criminal actions of veterans’ groups. Several assassinations in the 1994-1996 years supported this interpretation. “Criminal wars” involving Afghan veterans included two assassinations of the heads of the Russian Fund for Disabled Afghan War Veterans, an assault on the former head of this fund, an explosion and the deaths of thirteen people in the Kotliakovskoe military cemetery. Nevertheless, it is more likely that veterans’ criminal activity was more a consequence of structural, political and economical reforms than of their war experience. The fragmented character of the Russian state and the “diffusion of violence, tax and arbitral functions” led to the transfer of these functions away from the state to non-government actors<sup>29</sup>. The “weak” Russian state could not control redistribution of resources, a view which is illustrated by the history of benefits for veterans’ organizations.
- 22 Returning to the *exclusive principle* of veterans’ policy, participants of the Soviet Afghan war could not be “Veterans of War” but they have had a preferred position in the Soviet and post-Soviet society, which has given them the chance to be included in the big Russian roulette and thereby benefit to some extent from the fragmented, weak and transitional Russian state.

### “A New Group of Veterans or Veterans of Combat Operations”

- 23 After the cancellation of organizational benefits, the status of ex-Afghan war soldiers was defined by the Federal Law “On Veterans” (1995)<sup>30</sup>. Under the law, ex-soldiers were named as “Veterans of combat operations outside of Russia”. They became “Veterans” at least, but they were again not Veterans of War. One War alone still exists in Russian military legislation, just as many years ago; it is the Great Patriotic War.
- 24 In the beginning of the 2000s, the status of ex-Afghan soldiers changed. They were then termed as “Veterans of combat operations”. This was done in order to include in the system of veterans’ welfare other groups of ex-service personnel who were deployed in conflicts in the territories of the former Soviet Union and Russia. Welfare for these groups was asserted by the law “On Additional Guarantees and Compensations for Military Persons Carrying out Military Service in on the Territories of the Caucasus and Baltic States and the Republic of Tajikistan” (1993)<sup>31</sup>. Ongoing conflicts in the Chechen Republic (1994-1996, 1999-present) were the driver for the next reform in military welfare with a significant lag between the beginning of operations and welfare provision for their participants. In 2002 participants in antiterrorist operations in the Chechen Republic were included in the law “On veterans” as “Veterans of Combat Operations”. Before that, their provision was regulated by temporary decrees. According to the law, veterans of combat operations have special rights to pension provision, priorities in employment and education, reduced tax, housing, health,

prosthetic-dentistry, transport services (local and regional), orthopedic support, provision of rehabilitation vehicles, etc.

25 At the end of the 1990s, the main problem of veterans' provision was a constant gap between the declared privileges and the practice for claiming them. For instance, in 1995, existing privileges were characterized as "clearly insufficient" and "only paper benefits"<sup>32</sup>. Insufficient provision for veterans' needs devalued partly the preferred status of veterans. One of the reasons was again the extremely unclear mechanism for implementing veterans' policy. The government tried to resolve this problem through delegation of functions from central to local authorities. Since the end of the 1990s, social policy has undergone the following series of reforms. In 1998, the Article "On responsibility of federal and local government and financial sources of veterans' provision" was included in the Law "On Veterans" (Article 10). In 2004, the reform was known as a reform involving the "monetization of benefits" or replacement of non-monetary privileges by introducing cash-benefits<sup>33</sup>. In 2006, a new Law devolving responsibility from federal to local authorities to provide veterans' welfare was passed. The results of all these reforms are still difficult to estimate. The only thing that is clear is that the veterans of the Great Patriotic War obtained their previous preferred position and super-level of welfare from the consolidated and now "strong" Russian state<sup>34</sup>. Their benefits are provided by federal government while the benefits of the other subgroups of the veterans' population depend mostly on local authorities to implement them. Thus, this change seems like a renaissance of the Soviet veterans' policy and symbolizes an attempt to restore the previous civil-military contract between the military, the state and society.

## Conclusion

26 An *exclusive and hierarchical system* of veterans' policy exists in modern Russia. To some extent it would be true to say that all groups of veterans have a preferred status in Russian social policy; all groups of veterans are *exclusive*. Their special rights are provided by a developed system of welfare. Sometimes they must fight against the bureaucracy in order to obtain benefits, but this is a typical problem of the way welfare functions in Russia.

27 The presented review of the changes in veterans' legislation presents a case for the gradual development of a hierarchical ranking system of veterans' welfare that differed from war to military operations. In this system, one group of the veterans' population has the most *exclusive* and privileged position. Veterans of the Great Patriotic War are still the *true* Veterans of the *true* War. Behind them follow the Veterans of Combat Operations and participants of ongoing operations. Thus, it can be seen that nowadays the Soviet system of veterans' welfare is as alive as before. It appears that the new Russian state is trying to reanimate the ghost of its Soviet past and return to the symbioses which existed between the party, the military, and society in Soviet times. However, the place of the Communist Party is empty in the current system. It would be interesting to know what kind of ideology will be the new cement in this modern civil-military contract.

28 Perhaps, somewhere in the future the current system will be revised. The *true* War will become a part of history and then Veterans of combat operations will have the chance to become the leaders in the veterans' hierarchy. However, it seems that this change will not lead to the breakdown of the whole veterans' system without significant political changes and revision of the civil-military contract between the military, the state and the modern Russian society.

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## Endnotes

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**Abstract**

Every war creates a new “lost generation”, veterans of wars and military operations. After the end of wars, states develop different ways of rewarding ex-soldiers for their service to the state. This paper analyzes veterans’ policy in the Soviet Union, its transformation after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the new veterans’ policy in modern Russia. The paper reviews different historical stages in developing a veterans’ policy, and examines the main differences among the population of veterans. It outlines how the position of the most preferred group, the veterans of the Great Patriotic War, is supported by politics and expressed in civil-military relations. Further, the paper shows the gradual development in the welfare of veterans for other subgroups of veterans. In conclusion, it discusses the consequences of the modern veterans’ system in Russia.

**Keywords :** Russia, War Veterans, Social Policy

**Research Fields :** Sociology

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