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Russian Army *Mat* as a Code System Controlling Behaviour in the Russian army

- 1 This text is a shortened (and based on somewhat different material) version of my article “Russkii mat kak muzhskoi obstsennyi kod: problema proiskhozhdeniia i evoliutsiia statusa”, published in # 43 of *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*¹. The aim is to show that the military milieu (and some other social strata structurally close to it), has always been – and remains – absolutely adequate for the ‘*mat*-speaking’. Moreover, within these strata, *mat* has always carried on a rather specific function connected with creating a man’s identity as a ‘military’, i.e. a member of the armed forces. The adequate use of *mat* offers various and sometimes the only possible means of imposing oneself on an equal, a subordinate (or even a superior). As a matter of fact, *mat* is a basis for a whole code system that *de facto* controls different military behavioural practices.
- 2 I begin the discussion of Russian *mat* in its modern form and function by discussing its origins. The initial form of the key formula in modern Russian *mat* key (*eb tvoiu mat’* from *pes eb tvoiu mat’* (*fucked your mother* from *dog fucked your mother*)) seems to meet no objections among modern scholars studying Russian obscene speech practices. After the basic articles by B. A. Uspensky later published as a whole fundamental chapter in his *Selected Works*², nobody has really tried to call it into question. Nevertheless, from my point of view, the very logic of Uspensky’s argument, leading in its turn to the author’s basic hypothesis concerning the genesis of Russian *mat* and the stages of its formation, needs rather serious adjustment.
- 3 For example, Uspensky derives the basic formula from the “widely spread motif” of a marriage between the Sky Deity (or the Thunderer) and Mother Earth; with the subsequent travesty of the replacement of the Thunderer by its eternal enemy, a chthonic deity in a form of a dog, and then the second replacement of the Mother Earth with the interlocutor’s own mother. Then the acting subject is re-comprehended, due to the reduction of an initial formula, and since the verb form *eb* corresponds to any person singular, the third person (*pes*; *dog*) is replaced by the first one.
- 4 The total of the author’s argumentation in support of each one of the above mentioned initial formula evolution stages is very impressive. But it is possible to ask: for what reason the Thunderer’s eternal enemy whose traditional iconography connotes not dog but serpent, invariably takes the form of a dog in this particular context? Evidently trying to forestall the questions of the kind, Uspensky produced a special appendix – one of the two following his main text – to show the numerous serpent-dog parallels as reflected in very different mythological systems. Whilst not objecting to the bulk of the data, it proves nothing. Dogs seems to be the main figurative referent in all the Indoeuropean invective practices without exception (Uspensky even bases the etymological closeness of Russian words *pes* (*dog*) and *pizda* (*cunt*) tracing them back to the Pre-Slavonic verb **pisti* with a meaning *ebat’* (*to fuck*)), and it is the author’s view that such an exclusive attention only to one same animal has to be based on more solid grounds, particularly as the serpent itself is represented in the obscene vocabulary in rather a humble way.
- 5 Evolving the “dog theme”, Uspensky says: “We put no objective here to clearly find out more or less the reasons why the dog is perceived this way; the detailed discussion of this question would lead us too far astray. We only shall point out the possibility of serpent to dog associations, and to wolf also; the serpent, as well as the wolf, represent the incarnations of a “ferocious beast”, i.e. the Thunderer’s mythological enemy... and also embody a cruel and dangerous creature, inimical to a man. What is essential to us in this case is the idea of dog’s uncleanness, the idea that goes deep into history and far beyond the limits of Slavonic mythology”³.
- 6 That very question of the obscene speech practices associated with a dog, associations so clear that even the respective speech behaviour forms in some Slavonic language traditions have the

distinct “dog” etymologies, is, for the author, crucial. The following objectives – to look for a basis to the dog’s magical uncleanness and to the tabooing of the corresponding speech and other behaviour practices within the limits of a “human” territory, to examine the peculiarities of the obscene speech practices functioning in different social contexts – are logically bound to this.

1 - “Dogs’ barking”. Russian *mat* as a spatially (magistically) based male speech code.

- 7 The key to the problem of Russian obscene speech practices system genesis is to be found through one of the most sufficient characteristics of Russian *mat*, that makes it related to perhaps little but all the similar phenomenae existent in other Indoeuropean languages and cultures. I mean here the strict – in its initial state and status – gender-conditioned character of the appropriate speech behaviour forms. Russian *mat* is an indispensable attribute of any group consisting solely of males, only recently beginning to get into the females-only groups, and the practices of *mat* speaking in the mixed groups are to be reduced to the last twenty or thirty years (if to exclude certain practices seen as the ritual ones). In fact, every scholar who has raised this problem has mentioned this peculiarity, but up to now nobody has tried to make a following step, namely to link fundamentally the genesis of Russian *mat* as well as its semantic peculiarities with the specific gender conditions of its social existence.
- 8 The majority of researchers are so much taken with, from one side, the idea of *mat* as connected to the archaic fertility cults, and on the other, the carnival mythology created by Mikhail Bakhtin, that in the majority of cases any material conflicting with this point of view is simply being cut off the main trend of research. Thus we read in the Uspensky’s paper: “...they think at Polesseye, that the *mat* is especially banned for women: *mat*-speak coming from a woman is considered as a sin from which the land suffers...; whereas it is hold as a more or less common everyday male behaviour pattern, taking in itself no sin at all”⁷; wherefrom the author comes right to *mat*’s connection to the cult of the earth, while dropping the question of it being a gender-determined phenomenon. And, to mention Vladimir Zhelvis’ argument⁸ basing the exceptionally male status of *mat* on the exclusion of women from some vague “strictly male” fertility cult rituals in antiquity, the only comment would be that this hypothesis is quite typical for the book’s general standard.
- 9 Now, *mat* in domestic tradition is (or, rather, used to be) sharply defined by the speaker’s sex; it is a kind of a male code, the usage of which till recently was conditioned by a set of rather strict rules. The changes that happened to *mat*’s status in the course of the 20th century are discussed elsewhere, so here mention of *mat*-ruling taboos refers to the traditionally prevalent speech situations.
- 10 Nobody seems to question the fact that *mat* (as a social phenomenon as well as a set of stable speech constructions and “forms of speech”) bears relation to some magic-based practices. The problem seems to lie in other field: a) what magical practices exactly it goes back to and b) if we could try to reconstruct the practices in question, starting from the situation with modern *mat*.
- 11 What do we have? *Mat* is a prerogative of the male part of Russian (and Russian-speaking) population of the former Soviet Union. Therefore from the very beginning we can limit our search for the hypothetical ritual models to a sphere of male only rituals. The second essential premise is that any taboo-based magic is always strictly territorially conditioned (mention that the “territory” here is seen not so much in its topographic but in its magically significant connotations⁹). The things you can do in the woods are often subject to strict taboos in the village, not to mention the space where home magic is dominant. Hence, the sphere of our search is to be limited not only with the *mat* speakers’ gender characteristics but also with the territorio-magistical conditions these practices exist in.
- 12 What magistical (the term meaning the readiness of a human consciousness to see any item as burdened by the additional meanings, magic by origin) territories might and could be seen as the purely male ones, being opposed by this feature to the territories both “female” and “common” and thus producing the basis for the tabooistic systems? Agricultural ritual and the

fertility magic linked with it are strictly bound to specific territories. Agricultural magic – due to its procreative character – supposes that both sexes are to be included into the magic rites. More than that, in a number of rather archaic agricultural traditions there are labours seen as strictly female ones (in the traditional Russian culture – cropping and any other harvesting).

Agricultural magic is mainly female, connected with the “Mother Earth” cults beginning from the late Stone age. Thus if any strictly tabooistic speech or behaviour practices were to appear as based on the agricultural magic ritual, then in no way they could be oriented onto the exclusively male part of the population. Rather the opposite, gynaeco-centric situation seems possible on these grounds. And if obscene male speech patterns are really used during some rituals having to do with the fertility cults (season rites, weddings), this usage seems to be of a relatively late origin, to be based on already existent taboo codes which one can use to emphasize the masculine status of the participants within the “exterritorial” situation of the festivity.

13 If to look for the strictly male zones, then the hunters’ and the warriors’ territory would answer these in the majority of known cultures – that is the territories of nature either not mastered but known, where the relations between the man and the land are based on the “agreement” and “parity” grounds (hunting), or those alien to the man, chthonic and magically inimical (war). These territories were always seen as marginal ones from the point of view of the (magistically understood) cultural centre, surrounded by the “female” territories of a mastered land. This “frontier” originally was a male food territory, entering which a man was to drop automatically all his “family” magic roles, crucial for the “common” territories (those of a father, son, husband, head of a family), and instead to take upon oneself the strictly masculine roles, characteristic of the aggressive and unified from the gender point of view group (hunter, warrior, raider, hunter or war chieftain).

14 Supposing that the basic magistical territory for the rise of the male tabooistic code (that was seen thus as “obscene” at all the other territories in all the possible situations, except the strictly ritual ones) was the hunter/warrior territory, peripheral in respect of a cultural centre. The next question is – could we find any grounds for some special role played namely by the dog (or by the wolf, magically compatible with the dog) and namely within the limits of this territory – the grounds that would enable us to trace modern *mat*’s “masculinity” back to ancient male rites?

15 The fact is that the existence of male warrior unions, the members of which not only called themselves dogs/wolves, but actually felt so, is long ago proven for all the Indoeuropean habitat, from Celts to Indo-Iranians, and from Germans to Greeks and Romans (as well as for many other, non-Indoeuropean peoples). A. I. Ivanchik says in his article, provided with rather a good bibliography and significantly entitled “Dog Warriors. Male Unions and the Scythian Incursions into Asia Minor”⁷ :

The male unions and those rites and myths connected to them are well studied for Germanic, Indo-iranian, Greek, Latin, Celtic and, also, Balto-Slavonic traditions. One of the results of this research was the ascertainment of that major role that was ascribed within these unions to the image of dog-wolf. The warrior god, the patron for the union was honored in this very image, but what’s much more significant in our case is that all the members of the union was also considered as dog-wolves. Young warriors’ initiation consisted of their becoming wolves (the narcotic or intoxicant matters were used during the rites), who had to live for some period outside the human settlements with a life of the “wolves”. i.e. plundering and making war. In Spartan cryptia we see this custom especially well preserved; young Sinnfjotli in the Voelsung saga passes the equal initiation as a wolf, murderer and plunderer, for to become a full value warrior. Irish hero Cuchulain’s initiation resulting with his new name, meaning “the Culain’s Dog” (the usual change of name during the initiation), consisted of his service as a dog for Culain the godly blacksmith, i.e. he actually had to become a dog. This could be compared with the Ossetin Nart story about Ourymag turning into the dog and about the heavenly blacksmith who took part in Nart heroes tempering. Evidently the same idea gives birth to the Indoeuropean legal formula, according to which any murderer “becomes” a wolf, with the subsequent development of the notions like “outlaw” or “criminal” characteristic of this word and imparting a pejorative shade to it⁸.

16 The examples of the kind could be cited *ad infinitum*, to begin with Romulus who founded the strictly male (juvenile) and predatory town of Rome, and to finish with the Irish epic tradition, where, for one thing, Cuchulain is in no way the only hero bearing the root *cu* (*dog*)

in his warrior's name, and, for the other, practices of different warrior (and juvenile warrior!) unions, initiations and peculiar tabooistic systems (*geis*) are abundant¹⁰. It seems appropriate to remind ourselves here about the statistical abundance of "wolf" names in Europe and in Russia. Indeed, there are many more (times and times) Volkovs in Russia than Medvedevs¹¹, while the bear is traditionally looked at as a national symbol.¹² And if we sum Volkovs to Biriukovs and Odintsovs¹³, the statistic would become even more indicative. The traditional Indoeuropean plots based on the idea of lycanthropia are also of interest therein – especially as superstition accords that only the men tend to turn into werewolves.

2 - Dog/wolf status as an age-conditioned phenomenon

17 In the vast majority of the above mentioned cases the matter concerns not just the warrior unions, but namely the juvenile warrior unions. Cuchulain passes his initiation at seven years old, makes his main feats of arms¹⁴ at seventeen (i.e. at the year he have to prove his right to count as a rightful man) during the war of the Bull from Cualnge¹⁵ and is killed at twenty seven due to breaking taboos. Sinnfjotli turns into the wolf for a time only before he becomes a full value man and warrior. Spartan *cryptia* precede the proper man's initiation, being in fact its first preliminary stage. Romulus becomes a city founder after killing his own brother who declined to refuse from the "wolf" total destructiveness. The "seasonal" attachment of certain activities in a number of cultures seems to be significant too. Thus the Irish fenians spent 1 May till 1 November (from Beltain to Samhain) "in the field", while living in peasant cottages during the remainder of the year¹⁶. There was also an institution of "summer" and "winter" chieftains in some North American tribes. As a matter of fact, the wolves live according to a similar pattern, half a year living as mated pairs and the other half "in pack". The difference is that the "natural" wolves pack period fall on the winter half of a year. Could it be so, in this case, that the respective human practices are a kind of magical "spheres of influence division" with the wild confraternities? Winter being a season of chthonic magic prevalence, the "neutral" marginal territory is given to the "natural" wolves; while in summer, when the "cultural" magic gets stronger, it is occupied by the human "pack", living in accordance to the same territorio-magistically conditioned rules.

18 Within the tradition of male upbringing and class-to-class transition common to all the Indo-Europeans, every man had to pass through a peculiar "wolf" or "dog" stage. This stage was of an openly initiational character and the radical increase in social status is to be seen as a result of passing it – supposing, evidently, the right for marriage, for self-standing household activities (i.e. creative and procreative ones), and, which is particularly important in our case, the right to carry arms within the precincts of a settlement. The franchise of all the men having right to bear arms within the precincts of a settlement is a basis for all the types of a primitive democracy. At the same time, the actions incompatible with the status of a grown-up man who must subdue and control his aggressive instincts (within the zone of a common, "family" rule), lead to the return to the "wolf" status, which in this aspect couldn't but to be seen as anti-social and infamous one. For all the period of their lycanthropic metamorphoses, the wolf-warriors live at the periphery of a culture space, i.e. within the borders of a strictly male magistical zone, disturbing no "human" borders, but protecting them from any outer perils. As a matter of fact, in accordance to the archaic model of the world, they are ousted into a chthonic zone, the zone of death: hence the particular importance of werewolf motifs. In this respect, any attempt of an unauthorised and ritually "uncovered" intrusion to the "human" territory is to be seen as a contamination, as breaking of all existent human and cosmic norms, as a violence over the "home-land", "mother-earth" etc. A "dog" can acquire his right to the "normal" life only by passing the initiation rites' final stage, equivalent to an act of purification. In Sparta, the ex-wolves had to pass through the painful flagellation while being spread on the altar of Aphrodite (!) – and only after shedding their blood over it they could get their right to a first manly status, opening way to the regular set of arms and to a place in phalanx. The place Spartans reserved for their "wolves" in their battle orders was before the phalanx, and the latter were armed (apart from "the wolves' rage" and lack of necessity to follow certain set of rules)

with light and throwing weapons only. The age structure remained also the main principle of a phalanx formation: the first, the most dangerous ranks were occupied by the “recruits”, the middle ones – by men “in their prime”, and the rear ones, the closest to “home and temple” – by veterans, having the highest possible warrior status.

19 This kind of differentiation making a strict correspondence between the male/warrior status and the “time of service” is general to the Indo-European military and paramilitary structures – right up to the home army institution of “*dedovshchina*”, where during the first half a year of service (of two years in total, as a rule), being in a status of a “*dukh*” (“spirit”¹⁷), the recruit in fact has no rights at all and is looked at as somebody less than human, while the last half-year, burdened with no duties at all (if not to take in view the ritual “upbringing” of the younger ranks) is dedicated to the hypertrophied idea of “*dembel*” (demobilisation), namely the distorted in a peculiar way idea of “home and temple”.

20 Here it is worth remembering that the steady tradition that binds the warrior’s valour with youth and pays special attention to a young warrior’s death – regardless of how death is interpreted in different cultural and historical contexts. Within the modern European cultural tradition the motif of a young warrior’s death becomes more and more bombastic, at the same time losing its “heroic” constituent and acquiring mournful features, for the motif of senseless sacrifice. A marked tendency towards the evolution of a young hero fearing neither pain nor death to the no less formula image of a boy-soldier, a miserable and innocent victim of war, is to be seen in the European culture of the last 200 years. But the very fact that the theme itself remains actual and active for the myth-creating lets us interpret these “emotional modifications” namely as modifications of a settled cultural schema.

3 - The initial ambivalence of the wolf/dog status

21 Thus, the wolf/dog status is to be seen as an initially ambivalent one – from the point of view of its subjects as well as from the point of view of a community as a whole, whose marginal part the named age/gender group constitute. On the one hand, within the archaic IE cultures, any man has to pass through this stage if he wants and if he is able to acquire a “rightful”, “mature” age status. From this point of view the wolf/dog stage, framing and forestalling the initiation rites and, in a sense, being an initiation complex in itself, have certain positive connotations, connected above all with the notions of youth, strength, aggressiveness and permanent combat readiness (and also with a specific “divine irradiation”, the capacity to “run amok”, contempt and readiness for death and pain). These qualities are characteristic of the very notion of masculinity, positive markers of a cultural tradition and seen as fitting – to some extent – for any possible male behaviour pattern.

22 On the other hand, for grown-up men these modes of behaviour are territorially and magistically conditioned, and appear as unambiguously positive only within the limits of a strictly defined warrior/hunting territory of a “Wild Field”; displaying the same attitudes to those “foreign” to their territory of “home and temple” is fraught with the risk of breaking rules, with “hybris” that in some cases may lead to the deprivation of the higher male status.

23 Hence, the features of a “wolf” behaviour – speech patterns making no exception – can impart to their subjects some totally opposite characteristics. Within the limits of a “Wild Field” territorio-magistical situation, any demonstration of a “wolf manners” or a “wolf-speech” is, undoubtedly, aimed at elevating the subject’s situational status. Army culture being traditionally a male-only one (and marginal, from the point of view of the basic status culture zones) quite naturally is subject to the like behaviour models – as well as criminal and some other marginal cultures. This thesis is so obvious for anyone living in modern Russia that it needs nothing more than being just stated.

24 Of course, these forms of behaviour can take place not only at the “wolf territory” in a strict sense. The territory of a feast, being magically “fenced off” the common culture space, also permits – and sometimes even implies – the usually unacceptable modes of behaviour; being conditioned and constrained by ritual, any demonstration of an openly, “beyond the borders” masculine attitude, tabooed in “normal” life, can play a positive, beneficial, and even sacral role. Also in a conflict situation (male-to-male), when the subject is in sharp need of adequate

ways and means enabling him to suppress his opponent, the “everyday” norms can recede to the background, giving way to the habitual forms of aggressive demonstration in their “barefaced”, “wolf” forms. The usual tendency to exclude from the conflict situation all the participants and circumstances “magically incompatible” with it becomes apparent in the search for an adequate place where the conflict could be developed and settled (from the common “let’s get out of here and have a talk” and up to the common and strictly observed ban on indoor duels, especially in respect of any kind of living quarters), as well as in the selection of the “adequate” participants (quantitative restrictions (tête-à-tête), the instituting of seconds in a traditional duel situation; qualitative restrictions – the equal by age and status participants are favored, while women and children are virtually excluded from the process). Thus conflict itself is ritualised, “played” according to certain rules and – just like a feast – “fenced off” from the everyday culture space to prevent damage, creating no peril for the “peaceful” magistics so crucial here.

- 25 On the other hand, the “dog” status is inadequate from the point of view of those norms active within the everyday culture space. “Wolves” and “dogs” lack a place of their own inside the “human” territory, which can be contaminated by the very fact of their presence: all the respective forms and norms of behaviour are strictly tabooed, and their subjects, if not passing through the purification rites and thus transforming from wolves back into men, lack elementary “civil rights”. They are – by definition – the bearers of chthonic characteristics, they are “dead” from the magistical point of view and, as such, simply do not “exist”. (Hence the practice of “excluding” members of warrior bands from the common law. Thus, an Irish youth wanting to become a fenian had to obtain his clan consent on that he would not revenge for his relatives even if they would be killed up to the last living soul. At the same time, if a fenian caused any kind of damage to anybody, his kin were unaccountable.) In this case, arrogating the “dog’s” attributes to somebody appears to be rather a strong act from the magistical point of view – being equal to the an opponent’s obliteration, as having no right for existence.

The formula of Russian *mat*

- 26 Let’s return now to the key formula of Russian *mat*. The phrase “*pes eb tvoiu mat*” seems to be a perfect formula of the opponent’s social self magic annihilation, for from the point of view of the territorio-magistical connotations, its meaning can be described as follows. The opponent’s mother was defiled by a dog, the difference between a “wild” warrior and an actual animal in this context being insufficient. Therefore, the opponent is unclean, damned and – in fact – simultaneously dead in three senses: 1) because his father was inhuman (and so he is inhuman himself), 2) because his mother loses her right to be a woman by the very fact of her coitus with a dog, that makes her a bitch, and her son – a son of a bitch, and 3) because the territory where the coitus of the kind is possible cannot be “normal” and thus adequate for a human child conception – it is a “Wild Field” and as such opposed to any human space.

4 - *Mat*-speech practices’ specificity, functions and status in the context of their territorio-magistical attachment and the peculiarities of the Russian army *mat*.

- 27 I suppose that initially the “*maternaia laia*” (“*mat* barking”) was a kind of territorially attached code, having no obligatory invective connotations but strictly tabooed within the limits of foreign to it, strictly “human” territories. Because of this not only really strong *mat* invectives, but the very “out of place” speech practices acquire openly invective connotations within these zones – owing to the destructive “dog” magistics’ becoming even more destructive by being foreign outside the “prescribed” zone (in the earlier, magic-oriented societies) or at least to the fact that they simply “insult one’s ear” (in the later societies, oriented sometimes on the same but losing their initial magical meaning sets of social taboos).
- 28 In this case the denominations of those parts of a human body, that have to do with fertility and as such cannot be tabooed in (ideal) agricultural or pastoral societies whose welfare is based on the procreative magic procedures, are to acquire tabooistic status only in the case

when they are associated with the key formula situation. In other words, *khui* in this case is in no way a membrum virile, but *pesii*, the dog's *khui*, *pizda* is a bitch's, *such'ia pizda*, and the verb *iebat'* denotes not a coitus between a man and a woman, but between a dog and a bitch (let me remind that the 'dog-warriors' not only named themselves so, but were the dogs from the magistical point of view). Hence, the corresponding terms applied to the "human" reality won't be denominative by character – they'd be a part of an encoding practice, conveying quite a specific "wolf" attitude.

29 Indeed, nobody just 'cusses' using *mat*; up to the present moment people just speak it. Among the great quantity of lexical and grammatic forms derived from the three main and some more "auxiliary" productive roots, only insignificant number of words (nouns, mainly) could be determined as invectives. The verbs *iebat'*, *v''iebyvat'*, *vyiebyvat'sia*, *iebnut'*, *naiebnut'*, *naiebat'*, *ostoiebenit'*, *uiebyvat'*, *pízdít'*, *pízdít'*, *opizdenet'*, *okhuiet'*; nouns *khui*, *khuiin'a*, *khuieten'*, *pizda*, *pizdiulei* (Gen., pl.), *pízdets*, *bliad'*, *iebar'*, *iebenia* (pl.); adjectives *okhuiennyi*, *okhuitel'nyi*, *kherovyi*, *pízdetskii*, *pízdanutyi*, *iebnutyi*, *iebanutyi*; adverbs *okhuienno*, *khuiievo* etc. are extremely emphatic as compared to their non-mat synonyms, sometimes to the extent where they lack any adequate "translation" into "normative" Russian – but they are not invectives¹⁸.

30 The everyday, "normative" speech is totally transparent for a *mat*-speaker; contrarily, the lack of corresponding speech practices makes *mat* absolutely obscure for a – hypothetical – "pure" Russian language speaker. Any attempt to speak in *mat* using the same rules that organize the usual "human" speech inevitably gives the experimentalist away. Here we come to the main problem of the Russian army *dukh*, a fresher, a newcomer – but before switching to it we have to specify the main characteristics of the army *mat* that make it different from the same patterns in the everyday speech practices of the majority of the modern Russian-speaking males (and more and more females also).

31 The first of the army *mat* basic characteristics is its totality. No "closed zones" where *mat* would be more or less tabooed exist within the army culture – with the possible exception of the officers' flats in "military towns" when the wives or the daughters are present: but recently even this narrow zone gets more and more eroded.

32 The second is the universality of army *mat*. No such situation exists in army culture that could not be "covered by *mat*" (*pokryt' matom* = *oblozhit' matom* = *vymaterit'*) (to cover by *mat* = to berate).

33 And the third one is the primacy of army *mat*, for it is the basis for all the behaviour and code practices existing in the Russian army. The necessity for any *dukh* "*vsasyvan'ie sluzhby*" ("suction of service") comes only through mastering the *mat* 'army code', emphatic usage of which serves as one of the main markers for successful adaptation. Any – purely hypothetical – attempt to cling to "normative" Russian speech will inevitably lead only to the experimenter being transferred to the pariah class of *chmo*¹⁹. At the same time, any other form of passive or active resistance to the system of the traditional self-organization of the levy soldiers²⁰ (the system of *neustavnyie otnosheniia* ("out-of-regulations interrelations") or *dedovshchina*) are due to "correction" within the limits of the system itself. This kind "defensive" reaction on the part of the system is the best evidence for the *mat* encoding being primary for any practices existing within its limits.

34 The first thing that the recruits from non-Slavonic peoples learned in the Soviet army (and learn now in the Russian one) was *mat*. Mastering *mat* emphasizes the high siutative status of a speaker, and in the case of *inorodcheskii* ("other-peoples") staff-sergeant substitutes, in fact, the mastering of the "due-to-regulations" Russian language. Pronounced with a strong Uzbek (Azerbaijani, Lezghin etc.) accent, the phrase *Vas ne pízdishch – vi khuiete* is well-known to anybody, who used to be closely acquainted with the former Soviet army. After then, the *mat* encoding becomes the basis for the non-status male communication on the native languages – and for the communication with the representatives of the other nations – and goes hand in hand with permissibility of other behaviour practices, tabooed within the "native" cultural context, like eating pork by the demobilized Moslems.

- Poslushai, Ruslan, a iz chego ty shashlyk delaiesh?
- Iz svininy. Iz svininy shashlyk – samyi, bliad', vkusnyi.
- Ruslan, no ty zhe musul'manin. Razve tebe mozžno svininu iest'?
- Kakoi, na khui, mozžno – ne mozžno? Ia, bliad', v russkoi armii sluzhil.

(Saratov, 1996)

- (- Listen, Ruslan, what meat do you take for shashlyk?
- Pork. The pork shashlyk is the most, bliad', tasty one.
- But Ruslan, you are a Moslem. Does it mean that you may eat pork?
- What, na khui, may – not may? The Russian army is where I, bliad', did serve.)

35 The self-organized levy soldiers milieu, just as any other marginal milieu, needs a rigid system of the behaviour encoding, openly manifested through a system of no less rigid code markers. Only the system of the kind, strictly ranged and marked, allows the hierarchical relations, immanent to this milieu, to be instantaneously established and maintained. Any group of soldiers, consisting of any number of people coming from any different units, if being left on one's own, will organize itself in the course of a day or two into an hierarchical system with strictly established status positions and gradations. The garrison hospitals could serve as the best example of the like self-organization – the privates and sergeants usually come here one by one and from different units, but at once fit in the pattern. *Srok sluzhby* (the length of being in service) and the potential status of the future “bedmates” are instantly defined by those soldiers already being given the hospital treatment, through the system of markers, conveyed in the behaviour patterns and in the peculiarities of treating one's uniform, absolutely transparent for all the participants of the situation. Nevertheless, sometimes the complicated situations are possible :

A student of the Saratov State university taking part in the summer military training, is brought late in the evening to the garrison hospital in Shikhany with a minor trauma. His clothing is rather specific: after coming to the unit location, the “cadets” were produced with the dingy (next to white) uniforms of the 1936 standard (knee-long soldier's blouses to be gird by belt and galifé breeches). As he is sitting in the casualty ward, two patient “dukhs”, obviously sent by the “deds” for the reconnaissance, watch him from the dark corridor through the half-opened side door. The whisper comes:

- Vrode, dembel'. A vrode, i net.
- A khui iego zneiit. Poidiom, Demida sprosim.
- Pizdy dast.
- Oshibems'a, khuzhe budet.
- Nu, na khui, poshli.

Dukhs are away. A few minutes later a loud voice comes from behind the door.

- Vy cho, mudaki, bliad', okhuieli? Da ia vas, bliad', na khui, vyiebu I vysushu! Kakoi, na khui, dembel', eto zhe, suka-bliad', salaga letniaia.

(Privolsk, Sartatov region, 1985)

- (- Seems to be a ded. But who knows.
- Khui knows. Let's go and ask Demid.
- Pizdy dast (He'll beat us blue).
- Make a mistake and get worse.
- Well, na khui, let's go.
- You, mudaki, bliad', okhuieli? I'll, bliad', na khui, vyiebu I vysushu you (I'll fuck and squeeze you dry)! What, na khui, kind of a dembel' is he, he's just a salaga letniaia (specific term for the students passing their summer military training)).

36 The *a priori* presence of a behaviour encoding and code markers system in a form of the army regulations distinguishes the army milieu from other marginal – say the criminal – ones. This primarily established system serves as basic for the army milieu self-organisation. On one hand, the knowledge of the regulations is necessary for mastering the inner code systems. On the other, the regulations serve as a kind of foundation, on which the whole structure of the army “out-of-regulations” self-organisation erects itself, and the degree to which this or that person is free to treat the regulations is the best marker for his place within the “out-of-regulations” hierarchy. *Vsosat’ sluzhbu* means to master the fundamentals of such re-coding, giving one an opportunity to manoeuvre between the “up to regulations” and “out of regulations” codes.

37 The recruits’ behaviour transformation, necessary for the army mechanisms’ adequate functioning goes first of all through the regulations-bound speech practice system (e.g. the specific “normal”, “free from *mat*” officers’ speech, that M.M. Bakhtin would call a sociolect). The re-coding of this system also goes through the speech practice system – the *mat* one. Thus, one of the constitutive elements in the “education of the young” is a peculiar re-coding training, where any “wrong” from the point of view of the official army regulations phrase pronounced by a *dukh*, produces a *mat* rhyme on the side of a *ded* – or even an officer.

- Saveliev!

- A?

- Khui na!

- Dneval’nyi!

- Cho?

- Khui cherez plecho! Tashchi stanok iebal’nyi!

- Mozhno voiti?

- Mozhno Mashku, bliad’, za liazhku! A v armii – “razreshite”!

- A kak!

- Da khuiem ob kosiak!

38 The communicative act of the kind carries out several functions at once. Apart from “teaching the regulations”, it naturally demonstrates the difference in the warrior status that exists between the participants – through the demonstration of difference in level, to which they master the codes and are free in treating them. Violation of the regulated communication through ignorance at once provokes an openly out-of-regulations speech act, putting the interlocutors “on different sides of the regulations”.

39 At the same time, among those servicemen mastering the codes, any demonstration of a strictly up-to-regulations behaviour may be interpreted as a sign of refusing communication. The usual threat of a senior by rank to the inferior ones: *Ne khotite zhit’ po-khoroshemu, budem zhit’ po ustavu* (As you don’t want to live well, we shall live according to the regulations) has this very meaning. Here, as it seems to me, the reasons for the famous dislike that field marshal Suvorov had to *nemoguznaiki* is to be found. The demonstration of a traditional warrior ‘schweinbruderlei’ which Suvorov used to exploit when dealing with inferior ranks, was not evidence of him wishing to demonstrate any real equality of status. It was only to flatter – and it flattered – the soldiers’ self-esteem, as an act of acknowledgement of equal rights to master a code. In this case the up-to-regulations answer *Ne mogu znat’!* (I don’t know!) to any, even the most provocative question of the *otets-komandir* (father-commander) was equal to breaking up the communication. On the contrary, any dashing and spirited answer, even absolutely absurd (even preferably, absurd), was an evidence for unanimity in the acceptance of the code, mastering it and readiness to “play according to the rules” – and keeping the hierarchical relations untouched²¹. It’s hard to doubt that the basis for Suvorov’s code speaking could be nothing else but *mat*.

40 Lev Tolstoi, himself a former battle officer, made an excellent presentation of the like situation in the famous scene at the road, in the evening of 5th November, after the first day of the

Krasnoie battle narrated in 'War & Peace'. Kutuzov begins his speech addressed to the soldiers of Preobrazhenski regiment as a commander-in-chief, then Tolstoi brings the reader's attention to the change in Kutuzov's manner: now he speaks like a "simple old man, wanting to inform his comrades of something important". And after he ends his speech with a *mat* phrase, everybody who is present lets themselves go, 'buck-up' and become at once *a group of comrades*. In the Russian army code system of 1812 this speech act could have one meaning more: it emphasized the continuity of a "glorious" tradition, coming right from victorious Suvorov. The tradition of admiring with *krepkoie soldatskoie slovtso* (hard-boiled soldiers' little word), often without the direct "citation" but with a mute implying of mutual (on the writer's side, as well as on the reader's) knowledge of the code, comes down in the "high" Russian literary tradition from Tolstoi, through the writers dealing with the wars of 1914 – 1920s, like Babel or Serafimovich, and 1939 – 1945, like Viktor Nekrasov, up to the modern texts dealing with modern Russian army and modern armed conflicts.

41 But it seems that the traditions of *mat* functioning within the XVIII or XIX Russian army and those of the Soviet Army were somewhat different. The codes existing in the professional army of the Russian Empire offered a recruit some kind of a military initiation, having a life-long importance for him and providing him with an adequate set of behaviour patterns (seen as marginal by the rest of society, but nevertheless in this very quality fitting in the social interrelations net, for the quantity of those veterans coming back to their villages was insignificant if to compare it to the rest of male population)²³. The same codes functioning in the Red (and later in the Soviet) Army in the lower ranks based on the short-term levy principle, had quite a different social impact. The task of marginalizing a recruit, making him forget the ways of his native village and fit into the "wolf/dog" behaviour patterns of a lower warrior rank was done no less successfully. But a recruit was no longer condemned to a life-long marginal role, and after spending his two or three years in the army, a *dembel* had to return to the "normal" life passing no real initiation to a grown-up status. All the initiational practices existing inside the self-organized army milieu are – by the tradition – aimed at acquiring a high marginal status. After returning home, all the code markers of *dembel* status become useless trinkets, and his real social status remains the lowest possible.

42 Here we come to the main task of the Soviet Army: to marginalize the male population of the former Russian Empire. The pre-revolution levy system left the vast majority of male population outside the army training – and thus outside the training in those marginal behaviour practices that were basic for the army culture. The new one reduced the term of service but became total, aimed at instilling the new forms of behaviour in the vast majority of the most socially mobile age stratae of the traditionally rigid "country-side" population (peasants of different categories, mestechko Jews etc) that constituted up to 85% of the new USSR citizens. Peasant community, dictating the traditional life strategies to the majority of population, used to be the main stumbling block for any reforms and reformers of imperial Russia. Even Stolypin reforms, the most purposeful and pragmatic attempt to destroy the peasant community and to plant the new economic relations in the country-side, really failed.

43 Bolsheviks, being one of the weakest political forces at the Russian political scene in 1917, could succeed only by utterly slackening the situation, provoking the wave of violence – and then by saddling it. The four-million army of former peasants clad in the soldiers tunics, armed and supplied with totally new to them models of behaviour formed a necessary critical mass for the explosion. The success of the October revolution of 1917 in St. Petersburg was due to the number of reformed regiments quarteraged in the capital – having no itch to return to the trenches and at the same time acquiring the habit of the "soldiers' self-rule", the practice very much alike the primitive warrior band "armed democracy". The three years showed the limits of this "cavalry attack at capitalism", as Lenin phrased it – for these four millions were enough to change the situation "in the city", but as compared to the mass of not-marginalised country-side population, they were too little. While the main enemy was the defenders of *ancien regime*, while the main campaigns of the Civil war were deployed along the railway lines, taking and loosing the main junctions and towns with the warehouses, the success was on the bolsheviks' side. The former peasants were ready to pass through this bloody initiation,

and the phantom of total marginalisation seemed quite real. But when the Whites were beaten and the great numbers of mobilised peasants returned to their villages – and then the real Civil war began to unfold itself with Tambov uprising, with Kronshtadt revolt etc. For now the peasant community became aware of a real threat. And this community showed inclination to defend itself against “the city”. So Bolsheviks had to change their politics radically, forgetting for a while about the immediate World Revolution and letting the New Economy Politics to re-create the very “proprietary” relations that were one of the main targets for the early Bolshevik propaganda.

44 The task changed also. The peasant community was to be destroyed not at once, by the “cavalry attack”. It was to be taken “by starvation”, by implanting the forms of behaviour alien to it – and by doing so totally. The collectivisation couldn’t begin just after the end of the Civil war. Any attempt to force the peasants into *kolkhoz* in 1922 would mean the immediate end of Bolshevik rule. It took six years more and about 6 millions of young peasants passing through the Red Army training – and massive recruiting the demobilized from the ranks to the new Soviet structures²³ – to begin the process. It worth remembering that it was not the literate urban intelligentsia that became the main victim of Stalin’s repressions. The majority of the former somehow managed to find their way to the new ways of living and new behaviour modes²⁴. The peasants proved to be much more rigid. And those who were not “reforged” in the ranks of the Red Army or killed by the same army during the neutralisation actions, formed the main contingent of the army-guarded concentration camps: the natural habitat for the third of the main Soviet *mat*-based cultures, the camp/criminal one.

45 Thus the task was successfully fulfilled. The two main bolshevik aims were being solved: destruction of any social structure able to resist to a new system and creating a bottomless reserve of living force for the “future fights for the World Revolution”. The second aim was forgotten in the 1940s, as a result of the Second World war. Then Soviet socialism tried to become creative and thus to forget the first aim – or at least not to mention it too openly. But the army has always been one of the most rigid social structures. And the principles, on which the Soviet army (and the code systems operating in it) were based bore little difference from those of the Red Army. The marginal warrior *mat*-based code systems became “inborn” for the vast majority of the male population. *Dembelia* coming from the army taught their younger brothers up to the ways that could help them to pass through the army initiational practices – and quite naturally *mat* was the basis for such a knowledge (compare the fatalistic proverb, concerning the “inevitableness” going to prison: *ran’she siadesh’ – ran’she vyidesh’* (the earlier you get there, the earlier you get out) – taking in view that the code systems of the criminal milieu are also *mat*-based).

46 Within the modern cultural situation in Russia, when the marginalization of the speech practices (and, naturally, not only the speech ones) becomes total, army *mat* in some aspects loses its specific character, preserving some peculiarities which are to be looked at rather as the features of a professional argot. This process might seem equal to the process of the post-war liberalizing the speech practices within the English-speaking communities, but it seems to me that the reasons for taking down the taboos for the obscene speech are common only in some aspects. Although these very aspects seem to have to do with the army inner code practices.

Endnotes

1 Mikhailin V.Iu., “Russkii mat kak muzhskoi obstsennyi kod: problema proiskhozhdeniia i evoliutsiia statusa», *Novoie Literaturnoie Obozreniie*, # 43, 2000, pp. 347–393.

2 Uspenskii B.A., *Mifologicheskii aspekt russkoi ekspressivnoi leksiki*, Izbrannyye trudy. T. 2. M., 1997, pp. 67–161.

3 Upenky, *Ibid.* p.117.

4 *Ibid.* p. 71.

5 Zhelvis V.I., *Pole brani. Skvernosloviie kak sotsial’naia problema*, M., 1997.

6 See also : Mikhailin V.Iu., “Izbytochnost’: iskhodnyi sotsiokul’turnyi smysl», *Kul’tura, vlast’, identichnost’: novyye podkhody v sotsial’nykh naukakh*, Saratov, 1999, pp. 229–235.

7 Ivanchik A.I., « Voiny-psy. Muzhskie soiuzy I skifskie vtorzheniia v Peredniuiu Aziuu », *Sovetskaia etnografiia*, 1988, #5, pp.38–48.

8 *Ibid.* pp.40-41.

9 It's worth remembering in this context about the most particular, magically meaningful conditions of Rome foundation – about the fratricide, passing the furrow (i.e., in fact, both putting the magic border line and no less magic marking the act of ploughing – compare the traditional for many cultures figure of a ploughman warrior) etc. Besides, different ritual practices during the feast of Lupercalia could be also significant from this point of view.

10 See also McCone K.R., “Werevolves, cyclopes, diberga, and fianna: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland”, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, #12 (Winter, 1986).

11 *Volk* = Wolf; *Medved* = Bear.

12 Incidentally, “*volk*” and “*medved*” are nicknames given to Fall conscripts in the Russian army [Editors' note].

13 Both terms (*biriuk*; *odinets*) meaning a lone wolf with the specific accent on the animal living outside its pack.

14 Protecting the grown-up Ulad warriors fallen into the ritual state of feebleness.

15 See also the pack of teenage Ulad youths holding the position for few days while recovering of the wounded Cuchulain, falling everyone of them on the border of their land not to let the enemy across it.

16 Hence the decoding of an enigmatic phrase cited by Lady Gregory in her “Gods and Fighting Men»: that every fenian along with the other privileges has right to “the fostering of a pup or a whelp in any (peasant – V.M) house from Samhaine to Beltain», i.e. any household has to upkeep one fenian (“dog») from November till May.

17 Also translated “ghost” or “soul” [Editors' note].

18 The peculiarities of the mat encoding and of the mat usage are discussed at length in the article mentioned in footnote 1.

19 A complex notion, meaning a pitiful, obnoxious and foolish person of the lowest possible status, untidy in his clothes and habits and subject to «everybody's» disdain and ordering about. Possibly, going up to the Yiddish «*schmok*» passing usual rather way through the criminal argot, where we meet «*chmo*» and “*chmyr*” in the meanings close to the army ones, and «*shmu*» («cunt») and «*shmokha*» («whore»).

20 Any attempts to attribute the appearance of *dedovshchina*-like relations only to the late-Soviet army (See: Bannikov K.L., *Antropologiya ekstremal'nykh grupp. Dominantnyie otnosheniia sredi voennosluzhashchikh srochnoi sluzhby Rossiiskoi Armii*, M., 2002, p. 41) are but the evidence of a certain “research naivity» (peculiar to the Bannikov's book as a whole – in spite of abundance of rather interesting field material). Not to mention the other national and historical traditions, which any researcher calling himself anthropologist just must be acquainted with, a lot of suitable data could be found in respect of the Russian army tradition: giving a striking resemblance to the ones existing in the late Soviet or modern Russian army. Comp. e.g. the abundantly described (See: Kozhevnikov V.L., *Neformal'nyie traditsii rossiiskoi voennoi shkoly kontsa XIX – nachala XX vv. Voienno-istoricheskaiia antropologiya. Iezhegodnik, 2002. Predmet, zadachi, perspektivy razvitiia*. M., 2002. pp. 216 – 229 ; Komarovskii E.A., *Vospitatel'nyie aspekty kadetskikh traditsii v rossiiskikh imperatorskikh kadetskikh korpusakh XIX – nachala XX vv. Voienno-istoricheskaiia antropologiya. Iezhegodnik, 2002. Predmet, zadachi, perspektivy razvitiia*. M., 2002. pp. 195 – 215 ; N.K.M., Tsuk. *Pedagogicheskii sbornik*. 1908. Kn. 501. pp. 200 – 212; Kekushev N.L., *Zveriada*. M., 1991; Giatsintov E., *Zapiski belogo ofitsera*. SPb., 1992; Ignat'ev A.A., *Piat' desiat let v stroiu*. M., 1989) pre-revolutionary practice of so-called “*tsuk*” in the military schools (the reasons of this very military milieu being the best-described seems quite evident).

21 On the combination of the “brotherly», “comrade» terminology and feeling with the strict hierarchical relations as an inborn characteristics of a male warrior band, see a very strong in some aspects Enright's book : Enright M.J., *Lady with a mead cup. Ritual, prophecy and lordship in the European warband from La Tène to the Viking Age*, Chippenham, 1996.

22 Situation hardly changed after Miliutin's army reform of 1870. Although the general levy system was proclaimed the main principle of army complectation, in fact, hardly 20 to 25 per cent of recruits really went to the ranks – and the whole social stratae were totally excluded from the conscription system. Thus, in 1914, Russian Empire, having on paper the hugest army

in the world, could promise to its allies to mobilize “at once» only about 800 000 soldiers, of which, actually, only 400 000 were in time to begin the war activities against the German and Austro-Hungarian forces. In 1941, the Red Army units, concentrated at the USSR western borders had ten times more men, while there was no growth of population.

23 Not to mention the massive ideological pressing, the propagation of literacy that made it easier to create the unified educational and cultural space, etc.

24 Including the Party codes “for the inner use» – also *mat*-based. *Mat* was strictly censored from the everyday official usage and from “Soviet culture» that tried to appear a stable and a status one. But any first secretary of the regional party committee who wanted to control his subordinates and – at the same time – to create a “comrade» atmosphere, had to master *mat*.

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Abstract

This text is to be a shortened, restructured and based on somewhat another factological foundation version of my article “Russkii mat kak muzhskoi obstsennyi kod: problema proiskhozhdeniia i evoliutsiia statusa”, published in # 43 of *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*. Tracing the genesis of *mat* to the specific modes of behaviour, peculiar to the archaic male warrior bands, I’m going to show that the military milieu (and some other, structurally close to it social strata), has always been – and remain – absolutely adequate for the *mat* speaking. Moreover, *mat* has always carried on within these strata rather specific function connected with creating of one’s identity as a military, and its use offers various and sometimes the only possible means of impact at one’s equal or subordinate (or even superior). As a matter of fact, *mat* is a basis for a whole code system, controlling different military behaviour practices. The problems of the freshers’ adaptation and of the national specificities in the late Soviet and modern Russian army are to be considered with special respect.

Keywords : Dedovshchina, Hazing, Armed Forces, Russian Army, *Mat*, Military Service, Russia, Chechnya, Draft

Research Fields : Anthropology, Linguistics