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1 In Russia as elsewhere, military journalists and war correspondents find themselves at the heart of the tensions between the discipline and confidentiality required in military matters and the independence and openness required by the media. Their task is to inform society and shape public opinion, but they are also bound by the rules of the armed forces in situations where their own safety is at stake and a war of information is often being waged alongside the war on the ground. This tension is not particular to Russia but it is overt there perhaps more than in any other country. In the USSR, during wartime (whether the “Great Patriotic War” from 1941 or the Cold War until 1985), the constraints upon military journalists and war correspondents were severe, under the Main Political Directorate of the Soviet Army and Navy with its twofold responsibility for State censorship and Party ideological correctness. At a time when the media were called “means of mass information and propaganda”, what possible leeway did correspondents have between their “duty of self-restraint” and their “duty to speak up”? Under Gorbachev’s glasnost, starting in 1985, the coverage of military matters became a forum for expressing political criticism, whether by publicising the failures of the war in Afghanistan, bullying of new recruits, corruption among officers or the scandals of the nuclear deterrent. In the early 1990s, journalists put military discipline to one side in their work and devoted themselves to reporting on all the armed forces’ failings. Since the start of the new century, the authoritarian turn taken by the Russian government appears to have restored the priority of order, the “power vertical” and the “dictatorship of the law” both in the armed forces and the media, providing political control over media reporting on soldiers and war.

2 What is the reality? What tensions are there in the particular task of military journalists? What compromises do they make? To answer these questions, this special report goes into the professional practices of journalists to reveal the trade-offs, stratagems and...
The various articles describe people in action, professionals operating, journalists at work. This sociological approach, with people’s own opinions, transmitted directly or indirectly, shows both the extent of the constraints on their work and the degree of independence and subjectivity that exists in journalistic production. It outlines their participation in producing official discourse and their struggle to spell out alternative truths. Since the collapse of the USSR, the world of military journalists has been increasingly diverse and plural. Careers and backgrounds have broadened to include civilians, women, foreigners and non-specialists. They are committed in varying degrees to their jobs, which have been thrown open in ways that are politically, legally and technically complex. Even though there are indeed constraints, these are less the hierarchical, militarised type of the duty of self-restraint but more (neo-) liberalised in nature. This can be seen in the 2014 events in Ukraine, which have been particularly uncontrolled and dangerous for journalists on the ground. Our study of military journalism in the USSR and Russia provides an insight into the transformations within the Soviet and then Russian armed forces, the changes occurring in that country’s society and politics, the sociology of the media and journalism in Russia, and the contemporary world in general.

3 This special report comprises contributions that vary in form and content. There are duly verified scholarly articles and personal experiences of military journalists describing their ways of working. The report of a roundtable discussion in April 2014 in Moscow combines the views of journalists, historians and practitioners concerning the special features of military journalism. Book reviews remind the reader of how much research has been done in this area. Together the various sections offer new avenues for analysing military journalism in Russia.

Independence and subjectivity of war correspondents and military journalists

4 Since the wars of the 19th century, particularly in the Crimea, the history of military journalism has been marked by a gradual professionalization. An obviously male job until the end of the Cold War, military journalism and war reporting was done by officers and civilians, civil servants and writers, concerned to bear witness to the conflicts of their time. At the height of the Soviet 20th century, the drama of the Great Patriotic War featured the heroic figure of the war correspondent, whether international (such as Alexander Werth) or Soviet (Vasily Grossman). In the violence of the great clash between the Soviet and Nazi war machines, the reporting available shows how much independence and subjective freedom of expression journalists on the front could have. Nicolas Werth’s presentation of his father’s writings and career exemplifies the personal choices and commitments Alexander made on the Eastern Front. His articles were not so much the result of strategic constraints imposed by war as the account of a man fighting with the Soviet forces. In 1941-1945, war offered possibilities for journalistic expression that were perhaps greater than in later years, when the hierarchical and institutional apparatus was set up to control military journalism. After the victory, it was time to bureaucratise the army’s press section. The publications devoted to military matters during the Brezhnev years (Krasnaia Zvezda, the Soviet defence ministry’s daily newspaper, for example) showed this in their operations and content. Military journalists were trained by the army itself, as Ivan Chupin describes in his article on military journalists during
As glasnost opened up reporting after 1985, military journalists became more diverse. The opening up and liberalisation of the Russian media world extended to military journalism. Censorship (Glavlit) disappeared. The former Soviet army newspapers did continue, working under the control of the defence ministry. They largely remained attached to the Soviet Army’s “Cold War” editorial line, as can be seen in Sophie Momzikoff’s article on Zarubezhnoe Voennoe Obozrenie. But journalists from these editorial offices seized the opportunity to criticise the armed forces as an institution and move into independent media at a time when their expert knowledge was valued. Civilian media developed their military coverage, written by correspondents and specialists. New publications devoted to military matters appeared (Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie in the mid-1990s, for example). The amount of space given over to the armed forces became larger and more diverse. Personal accounts of the war in Afghanistan and the many conflicts that erupted in the post-Soviet zone (Chechnya, Moldova and Nagorno-Karabakh) were given pluralistic treatment in the press in the 1990s.

Within this diversified environment, journalists made choices. Their careers reveal the tensions and controversies they encountered and the compromises they devised. Some Soviet military journalists escaped from the control of their former employers to join the civilian media (such as Aleksandr Golts). Others stayed put but altered their vision of the armed forces and modified their editorial line. These careers and practices became more diverse, and Ivan Chupin describes two conceptions of the work: one toeing the army line and the other critical and investigatory. In response, the military authorities attempted to keep control of these changes by sending their own journalists to write for civilian publications. However, their control was losing its force. New professionals were appearing in the war journalist community. Foreign correspondents went out to operational areas in the former Soviet Union and established relations with Russian journalists (see the account by war photographer Yuri Tutov). These new arrangements raised the issue of the relations and exchanges between journalists of various origins and the specific constraints imposed on them. This period also saw women arriving in military journalism. Examples are Anna Politkovskaya covering the Chechnya War and Olga Allenova, a journalist on Kommersant, in the same theatre. This diversification brought plurality into the treatment of military information. In this issue of PIPSS, Allenova’s account shows how she shifted away from being a supporter of “restoring order” in Chechnya in the early 2000s as she saw the violence this entailed (see Amandine Regamey’s review of her book). Allenova describes her growing awareness of the criminal abuses of the anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya. The interview with Tutov reveals how he distanced himself from the interior ministry’s media and began to work more with international press agencies. These journalists displayed their independence of judgement in a changing military world. More recently, since the early 2000s, this independence has increased as a result of new information and communication technologies that extend the range of journalistic practice. Reduced technical constraints, miniaturisation of recording devices, and speed of transmission lead to faster circulation of information, including from war zones. The possibilities available to military journalists seem therefore to be widening.
Tensions and constraints at work

But this diversification has aroused strong tensions. This could be seen at the round table discussion of military journalism held in April 2014 at the Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU), Moscow, in partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Andrei Raskin, journalism professor at the RGGU, listed the new difficulties facing military journalism at the present time. He said that untrained journalists are often sent to report on hostilities, showing great independence but at the risk of their personal safety. He expressed concern at the presence in operational theatres of independent journalists of uncertain status, given great freedom but little protection by their editorial managers. He also questioned women’s legitimacy to cover conflict: “War journalism as a whole is ‘not a place for women’ any way”, he said. Journalists’ independence, more diverse backgrounds and allegiance to the civilian community raise the question of their security in military theatres and arouse distrust from the professionals of military journalism.

In the Russian armed forces, this distrust has given rise to new communication strategies better suited to post-Soviet political and media reality. Raskin described a certain distrust in the armed forces towards independent journalists. But the military authorities are also aware of the need to work with journalists. More flexible types of constraint, often inspired by Western practice, are being tried out by the military institutions. Having “embedded” journalists during armed conflict makes it possible to control the transmission of information. Embedment enables journalists to be at the heart of events and broadcast authentic factual accounts of warfare but does raise the question of their surveillance and official exploitation of them at times of crisis. The communication practice was developed by the Russian army during the Second Chechnya War from 1999 on. Journalists may even appreciate being enrolled in this way. Aleksandr Sladkov, a well-known Russian television presenter, said, “Embedded journalism is a good progressive way to regulate the links between civilians and the military. A large-scale example of embedded journalism would be in the Soviet Army, during World War II, when 280 operators were recording films”. This reference to the Great Patriotic War is used to justify current cooperation arrangements between the armed forces and journalists.

The work of military journalists is regulated by new legislative codes. In the early 2010s, a large number of laws were passed to control the activities of newspapers, their editorial staff and the independent journalists who produce blogs (now deemed to be mass media if they have more than 3,000 hits a day). The role of Roskomnadzor (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media) in controlling media content has also been extended. Although direct institutional constraint in the form of censorship has disappeared, political control over military journalists has taken on a variety of new forms. “The laws regulating journalism in Russia are not that bad since they are inspired by French laws; however, in the past few years they have been amended significantly. The laws now act in a more restrictive way, with the excuse of the last counterterrorist laws’ boundaries”, says Galina Arapova from the Mass Media Defence Centre. These legal forms of control of journalists’ activities do not guarantee the professionals’ security. Violence against critical independent journalists (the murders, for example, of Dmitri Kholodov and Anna Politkovskaya) illustrates the dangers of the
profession. In the past three years, 250 journalists have been killed in Russia (according to Arapova).

Since the spring of 2014, the fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine has ironically revealed both the freedoms military journalists enjoy and the constraints they work under. This conflict, widely covered by print and digital media, is also one of the most dangerous for journalists and most closely monitored in media terms. In this undeclared war, involving anti-terrorist operations, guerrilla warfare and undercover counter-espionage, the control over military journalism and war reporting is variable and may even be absent. Because there has been no official declaration of war, the system of embedding journalists with the armed forces is not operational. News reporting therefore depends on the initiative of special correspondents, accounts by members of the public, part-time and citizen journalism, web posts and blogs open to more than one interpretation. The ill-defined nature of the current conflict and doubts about the identity of its protagonists place journalists from outside in a dangerous position. According to statistics kept by Reporters sans frontières, the arbitrary arrest and disappearance of journalists soared in eastern Ukraine in spring and summer 2014. The victims of the conflict come from every category of journalist of whatever nationality (Russian, Ukrainian or Western) or media (television, radio, print). The insurgents of the People’s Republic of Donetsk actually issued a decree in July 2014 prohibiting “journalists, cameramen and photo-reporters” from “being present in combat zones and near military installations” during armed operations. These measures restricting access to the theatre of operations allow the most divergent interpretations of the military situation. In the absence of any clear institutional, legal or political framework, the new freedoms afforded by post-Soviet liberalisation and new media have not automatically led to a pluralistic coverage of military events but do endanger both journalists and the pluralism of information. Military journalism is thus a reflection of the social and political transformations that have occurred in contemporary Russia and its areas of intervention. It may consist of bearing witness, expressing opinion and commitment—a sign of journalists’ independence. But this degree of subjectivity comes at a higher cost than elsewhere in the absence of any effective public procedures for protecting its authors.

NOTES


7. See Olga Pavlenko’s contribution to the April 2014 Round Table.


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