Memory, Mind & Media (2025), 4, e2, 1–13
doi:10.1017/mem.2025.2

Memory, Mind & Media

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Men must fight, women must wait': The war in Ukraine and Russian traditionalism

Maria Kurbak

Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences, and Global Studies Program, Washington University in St. Louis, MO, USA
Email: kurbak@wustl.edu

(Received 09 August 2024; revised 01 February 2025; accepted 10 February 2025)

Abstract

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is primarily examined through official narratives, propaganda, and victims' testimonies. However, the deeper motivations driving Russian men to enlist and fight often remain underexplored. While Western and Ukrainian media frequently attribute this to Russian propaganda, animosity towards Ukrainians, naivety, or financial incentives, these factors only partially capture the issue's complexity. An additional motive rooted in an enduring 'behavioral schema' also plays a significant role. This schema is based on traditional gender roles influencing men's decisions to engage in combat and women's decisions to support them. By analyzing Russian social media and combatants' writings, this research reveals how war discussions are framed by entrenched 'traditionalist' behavioral patterns. Utilizing Astrid Erll's concept of 'implicit memory' and James V. Wertsch's concept of narrative templates, this study elucidates not only the official narratives of the war but also the 'hidden' narratives that shape collective feelings and memories.

Keywords: collective memory; memory studies; implicit memory; war in Ukraine; traditionalism; gender

> 'Of course, I'm not so much interested in buses, telephones, and other [...] equipment.
>
> As in the much more important question: have the people of this city altered inwardly?'
>
> "Yes, that's the most important question, sir"
>
> Mikhail Bulgakov, '*Master and Margarita*' (Bulgakov, 2008, p. 122)

On May 9, 2021, the French weekly *Le magazine du Monde* published an issue focusing on the history of teenagers from the Siberian city of Kansk, who were detained in 2020 for allegedly disseminating political propaganda. Benoît Vitkine authored an extensive article titled 'Navalny's Generation: Youth and Rebellion in Siberia under Putin' (Vitkine, 2021). Eighteen months later, in January 2024, a journalist from the Russian independent newspaper 'Novaya Gazeta' revisited the site to meet the families of the two principal figures

discussed in the French publication. By then, one of the young men, Nikita Uvarov, had been incarcerated, while the other, Pavel Dzhevnerovich, had been killed in the conflict in Ukraine.

The reporter, Alexei Tarasov, traveled to another location in Siberia, the small village of Rudyansk, where these two young men were born and raised, and engaged with residents. Tarasov noted, 'I never heard people mention Putin, Moscow, or anything about politics; not a word on the Special Military Operation[1] (SMO), either for or against.' He continued by stating,

> Regardless of individual opinions, the men from the villages went to the SMO, while the women supported them – not out of admiration for Putin or belief in his rhetoric. Their actions were not motivated by a desire to conquer Ukraine; this was of little concern to them. All the disputes I heard there started and ended with a set of primitive, rigid norms about gender roles. Mutual pledges, unbroken (on conscious and probably unconsciousness levels), rural *obschina*[2], artel. Men: if ours [our men] are there, why am I here? Women: whatever men decide, we are obliged to support them. This is the sole value – to stand for ours. That is how it has always been and how it will always be (Amen). This is an anachronistic world, where historical logic and laws seem irrelevant, and change is elusive. Grounded, nature-oriented, brutal.' (Tarasov, 2024. P. 13).

The residents of the Siberian village remarked, 'The French journalist asked many insightful questions but failed to understand either these young men or the people here.' This is unsurprising, yet the issue is not the enigmatic 'Russian soul' that foreigners supposedly cannot grasp. Rather, the problem lies in the assumption by French journalists and Europeans that Russian society mirrors their own, merely in more challenging conditions. Consequently, the journalist mistakenly perceived signs of imminent change in the young Siberian men. He believed these changes were imminent. However, the following year, one of these young men voluntarily enlisted in the Russian army, similar to many other young people from Russian villages and cities. What motivated him to make this choice? Western and Ukrainian media often attribute it to the impact of Russian propaganda, hostility towards Ukrainians, naivety, or a desire for financial gain.

In some cases, these reasons may hold validity. However, another motive rooted in a very old 'behavioral schema' also plays a role. This pattern is grounded in traditional gender roles that influence men's decisions to fight and women's decisions to allow them. The origins of this schema can be traced back to the Russian Empire and have been passed down through generations for centuries.

A failure to recognize this often results in misunderstandings of Russia's internal and external politics. When visiting Russia or viewing it through media, people typically observe large modern cities, advanced technology companies, and upscale restaurants. Consequently, they perceive Russians as 21st-century citizens akin to the European or American middle class.

However, a closer examination reveals that Russian society retains the memory and traditions of a patriarchal, rural culture and consciousness, which originated in the Russian Empire and was later distorted by the traumas of Soviet and post-Soviet policies. This can be articulated as the traditionalist schema of 'men must fight and women must wait for them,' which has re-emerged in Putin's Russia. This schema is not the only one present in Russian society and has been transmitted across generations. Each society possesses a corpus of

[1] The term used in Russia to refer to its military actions in Ukraine.

[2] Rural commune.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narratives, which Alasdair MacIntyre refers to as 'a stock of stories,' that define ethical norms, motivations, and behavioral models. In this context, it is also pertinent to consider the concept of 'a stock of behavioral schemata' associated with these narratives. Under specific circumstances, particular narratives and behavioral schemata may receive heightened political endorsement, distinguishing themselves from others and establishing a new normative framework.

To examine the traditionalistic schema 'men must fight and women must wait,' I will employ Astrid Erll's notion of 'implicit memory' (Erll, 2022) alongside James Wertsch's concept of narrative templates (Wertsch, 2021). The application of these theoretical frameworks will facilitate an exploration of not only the official narrative surrounding the war but also the 'hidden' narratives and behavior schemata that significantly influence individuals' emotions and memories.

Scripts, narrative templates, and implicit memory

Initially, the term 'implicit memory' emerged in cognitive psychology and is referred to processes of individual memory that operate below the level of consciousness in subjects (Graf and Schacter, 1985). In collective memory studies, it was developed by Erll (2022) when she brought up the essential role of non-commemorative memory in understanding collective memory. When using this term, she referred to the 'myriad possibilities of the past affecting the present in ways that most people remain unaware of.' (Erll, 2022, p. 2).

Most research in memory studies focus on commemorative memory, especially states' 'history policy,' the role of media in remembering and forgetting, monuments, museums, and their role in commemorating particular events or persons, etc. But there are many aspects of collective memory that cannot be understood under the heading of conscious efforts of commemorative memory. Instead, these operate behind national narratives, official or non-official history, and fall under the headings of 'habits' or 'mentality' or a nation's 'soul,' something from our past that, by some means that keeps living on in societies, is transferred from generation to generation, and plays a role in nations' future. As William James (1890) argued, habit is 'the enormous fly-wheel of society' (p. 121), suggesting that 'the underlying mental habits of a national community can maintain their inertia even as surface behaviors change' (Wertsch, 2022). Oftentimes, these 'habits' operate deep in national history and can stay hidden for years (or even centuries) until a specific situation occurs and makes them visible (and researchable).

Like national narratives, these schemata are unique to each country and nation. Although they may echo certain recurring storylines and patterns found in the narratives of other nations, the comprehensive array of their sociocultural dimensions and associated sentiments remains inherently distinctive.

Narrative schemata, or narrative templates (Wertsch, 2021), are another way that explicit and implicit memory is transmitted across generations. Each nation has its own set of specific events, and repetitious discourse about them gives rise to schemas that travel from generation to generation and affect national memory. For instance, when exploring Russian collective memory, Wertsch (2021) has described the 'Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies' narrative template that underlies much of official and non-official Russian narratives about events over the centuries. This narrative template consists of a story of Russians living peacefully, then the emergence of an existential threat from a foreign enemy, followed by Russians' being forced to struggle heroically with this enemy alone and leading to victory and expulsion of the enemy in the end.

In *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that national myths and narratives are essential for understanding the ethical models and behaviors that shape

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

people's motivations and mindset. He asserts, 'There is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 216). If one considers 'the stock of stories' to encompass not only folklore and myths but also a diverse array of narratives concerning historical events and quotidian practices, it is reasonable to conceptualize 'the stock of behavior schemata' as emerging from these narratives. Consequently, behavior schemata are integral to both individual and collective identities; akin to specific narratives and beliefs, they underpin distinct 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991).

Efforts to investigate and elucidate the ways in which sociocultural factors influence human behavior can be found in the concepts of 'script' and 'life script.' The concept of 'script' was used by Schank and Abelson (1977), who defined it as a sequence of events that unfold in a specific order, with each event facilitating the occurrence of subsequent events. This foundational idea was further refined by Berntsen and Rubin (2002) Rubin and Berntsen (2003), Berntsen and Rubin (2004), who expanded the concept into that of the 'life script.' A life script encompasses culturally shared expectations regarding the order and timing of life events within a prototypical life course specific to a given culture. Within these life scripts, distinct gender expectations and responses to both anticipated and unanticipated life events emerge. This concept is what I refer to as a 'stock of behavioral schemata.'

Traditionalistic behavior schema and Russian 'deep people'

As previously noted, each society encompasses a range of diverse 'imagined communities' that share specific beliefs, narratives, lifestyles, and expectations for life. Consequently, political leaders face the challenge of determining which communities and narratives to prioritize and highlight in social discourse. Furthermore, particular events can precipitate significant shifts in public behavior, awakening feelings and emotions that may revive behavioral schemata that have remained dormant for years, yet are implicitly retained in the national memory. For instance, the shock of 9/11, revived in American society Cold War narratives of 'Cold Warrior manhood,' 'the nuclear family,' 'redomesticated femininity,' and 'constructed rescue fantasies.' These revivals resulted in the curtailment of civil liberties, the authorization of torture, moral panic, and the normalization of brutal masculinity (Faludi, 2007).

However, it is not only transient, shocking events that can prompt significant societal shifts in normalized behaviors; prolonged circumstances can also exert substantial influence. Economic crises, social tensions, migration challenges, and other factors may reshape the sociocultural landscape. In the case of Russia, a convergence of political and sociological events has contributed to the re-emergence of an archaic traditionalist behavioral schema as of 'men must fight, women must wait.'

This schema can be described as a life practice with stringent gender roles and expectations, wherein the socially acceptable model for men is that of a brave soldier and breadwinner, while for women, it is that of a housekeeper, child raiser, civic worker (or housewife), and patient waiting spouse. Within this framework, men are viewed as the sole proprietors of their lives, and a woman's opinion is considered only in relation to her direct responsibilities. While women may engage in military or near-military service or training, their participation in combat remains strictly limited.

Interestingly, these archaic norms of traditional gender roles, where men engage in warfare and women wait supportively, were not part of the dynamics of World War II. During that period, both men and women actively participated in combat and support roles, a reflection of Soviet gender policies that promoted equality as well as the necessity of total mobilization following Germany's invasion of the USSR.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But in the current conflict in Ukraine, Russia, with a large pool of human resources, has mobilized selectively by excluding women from combat. In this context, President Putin has drawn upon historical Imperial and rural norms from Russia's past, reinstating and reinforcing rigid gender roles through contemporary policies. For instance, Russian women are prohibited from joining combat forces in Ukraine; they may serve in capacities such as medical staff, journalists, or supply workers, but rarely in direct combat. Putin has consistently expressed his belief that war is unsuitable for women. In December 2023, he addressed media agency heads, asserting that even female military correspondents should be removed from frontline zones of the Special Military Operation (Arkhipov, 2023). This suggestion was applauded by most Z-channels[3]. The author of the Telegram channel 'ЗАПИСКИ VETERANA[4]' [Notes of a Veteran] commented, 'That's right. War is not a place for women.

These gender dynamics, endorsed and promoted by Putin, align with his long-standing advocacy for 'Russian traditional values,' a theme prevalent since 2012. This gender schema, characterized by the frequent absence of men due to warfare or distant work, leaving women to manage daily life with support from family or communal members, is long-standing and deeply rooted. While this dynamic has largely faded in larger cities, it persists in smaller towns and villages, particularly in poorer regions and national republics, where it resonates with local ways of life. These conservative segments have consistently been strong supporters of Putin's regime.

Vladislav Surkov, a former aide to President Putin, officially acknowledged this in his 2019 article for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* [Independent Gazette]. In this article, he argued that Putin's administration understands and serves the 'deep people,' a concept contrasting with the 'deep state' of Western democracies (Surkov, 2019). According to Surkov, these 'deep people' have 'a mind of their own, unreachable by polls, propaganda, threats and other methods of direct study and influence.' Their involvement in the political process, even in wars and large-scale economic experiments, is superficial. 'The nation's two lives, the superficial one and the deep one, are sometimes lived in opposite directions,' Surkov wrote, 'but they never merge into one.' The Putin state with its expansionist drive, goal of geopolitical greatness and socially conservative impulses is, according to Surkov, traveling in the same direction as the 'deep people' and thus 'isn't subject to the destructive pressures of history's headwinds.'

Indeed, understanding these 'deep people' is crucial for political success in Russia. Putin, whether consciously or unconsciously, has aligned his rhetoric with this mindset and behavior, successfully reintroducing conservative rural traditions as a new norm during the war. Notably, many men who enlisted in the Russian military forces in Ukraine hail from small towns, villages, and economically depressed regions. These individuals, representatives of the 'deep people,' embody traditional norms and behavioral schemas that have re-emerged at this juncture in Russian history.

However, it is not only 'deep people,' inhabitants of Russia's small towns and villages, who adhere to the narrative and behavioral schema of 'men must fight, women must wait,' among combatants who voluntarily signed contracts and went to war, there are also numerous men who were born and raised in Russia's larger cities. The factors contributing to their inheritance of this archaic mindset may vary. Among the potential explanations for this phenomenon are the distinctive characteristics of Soviet urbanization, which has been described as 'fast but wild and ugly' (Zayonchkovskaya, 2000, p. 4). This approach prioritized the quantity of cities over the quality of urban life, leading to the phenomenon known as the 'rurarization of the cities.' In this context, rural consciousness, culture, and lifestyle

[3] The "Z" has become a militarist symbol in Russian propaganda and is used by Russian civilians to indicate support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

[4] https://t.me/notes_veterans/14193.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

permeated urban spaces, accompanied by the frustrations and aggression associated with severed roots.

Additionally, the merging of urban culture with prison and GULAG subcultures presents a significant factor. Most Soviet cities were constructed using the forced labor of convicts, many of whom remained in urban areas adjacent to prison zones following the completion of their sentences. In contemporary Russia, the number of individuals with prior incarceration experiences, or those with close friends or family members who have such backgrounds, remains notably high. Consequently, prison subculture – characterized by its distinctive slang, rigid behavioral norms, and patriarchal gender roles – continues to play a crucial role in shaping Russian culture.[5]

The formerly rural population that rapidly relocated to Soviet cities served as carriers of archaic traditions and gender norms, which persisted beneath the surface of official Soviet gender equity laws. This dynamic resulted in various social consequences, including the 'double oppression' of Soviet women – who were expected to be effective workers, active civic participants, and dedicated housekeepers and mothers – and a 'masculinity crisis' among Soviet men. Many men continued to believe that their primary role was as the main breadwinner but found themselves grappling with profound social stratification, limited benefits available only to the Soviet elite, and a deepening economic crisis. Concurrently, the rise of women's independence led to accumulated frustration, anger, and depression among these men.

The 'masculinity crisis' has been extensively discussed since the late 1970s, prompting Soviet leaders to respond to these social dynamics. Their response involved the promotion of a cult surrounding the Soviet soldiers and intelligence operatives through films and television series. This propaganda proved to be particularly effective, especially as many Soviet veterans passed away, allowing for the creation of an idealized and sanitized image of their experiences, which bore little resemblance to reality. However, this propaganda also produced a detrimental side effect: it cultivated frustration among men who, influenced by these glorified portrayals, came to believe that true masculinity necessitated military engagement. They were met instead with an army in significant decline, marked by rampant corruption and hazing from the 1970s to the early 2000s.

These issues were prevalent across all Soviet republics. Nevertheless, the collapse of the USSR was often perceived in many of these republics as a long-awaited liberation. The national liberation and independence narrative encapsulated a sense of optimism for the future, even while confronting various challenges. Many former Soviet republics began to orient themselves toward Europe, gradually adopting European laws and values while overcoming past traditions and behavioral patterns. In contrast, in Russia, the dissolution of the USSR and the subsequent economic and political crises of the 1990s were viewed as a collective humiliation and shame. This perception created fertile ground for Vladimir Putin to cultivate revanchism and anti-Western sentiments.

Empirical analysis of trends in Russian discourse

To examine these claims, I analyzed the writings of Russian soldiers – including books, poetry, interviews, and social media posts – to examine how discussions about the war are influenced by longstanding 'traditionalist' behavioral schemas. Following the onset of the Russian full-scale war in Ukraine, I compiled a diverse array of materials to gain insight into the narratives crafted by Russian combatants and volunteers regarding Ukraine and Russia's

[5] *Radio Chanson*, a station renowned for its broadcast of *blatnaya pesnya*, or "criminal songs," consistently ranks among the top three most popular radio stations in Russia, boasting an audience of over 5.6 million listeners.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

involvement in its domestic affairs. Due to space limitations, not all sources are cited in this article. At the time of writing, the collection was comprised of 618 social media posts and comments from platforms such as Telegram, VK, Pikabu, Odnoklassniki, and YouTube, along with 15 songs, 7 poetry collections, 4 volumes of short stories, 9 films, 32 interviews, 24 leaflets, 61 newspaper articles, and 57 books created by Russian combatants and volunteers involved in the 'Russian spring'[2] of 2014 and Russia's full-scale invasion from 2022 to 2024. This collection serves as a foundation for exploring numerous topics, including the rise of nationalism, interethnic and interreligious relations within Russia's pro-military community, visions of national and global futures, attitudes towards peace negotiations, myths about Ukraine and Ukrainians, and the construction or reconstruction of identity.

In this article, I focus on the motivations of Russian combatants to engage in the war in Ukraine and the role of traditionalist schemas in shaping these motivations. In the course of data collection, I conducted an analysis of various literary forms, including books, essays, poems, and songs authored by Russian men who have verifiably served in Ukraine. In my examination of social media, I employed targeted keyword searches, concentrating on terms such as 'mobilization,' 'volunteer' (including 'dobrovolets' and 'dobrobat'), and 'SMO.' I did a detailed reading of all identified blogs to understand the contextual frameworks within which these topics were discussed.

Emphasis was placed on blogs addressing the deliberations surrounding the decision to enlist in Russian military forces in Ukraine or to abstain from such actions. I cataloged the arguments presented by both proponents and opponents of this decision, striving to attain a nuanced understanding of the motivations that inform their respective positions. This process also involved an examination of the comments accompanying these posts as they frequently offer valuable insights into public sentiment and prevailing discourse.

I included only those profiles that were publicly accessible, featured an author's photograph and profile description, and had multiple posts available for review. While it is acknowledged that the potential for fake profiles, sponsored content, or trolls exists within this selection, the extensive scope of the sources mitigates the impact of such anomalies on the overarching conclusions drawn from the study.

'Men must fight, women must wait': The return of the traditionalist schema.

The re-emergence of the 'old traditionalism schema' in public rhetoric was significantly influenced by the 'Russian spring,' marked by Russia's interference in Ukraine's domestic affairs. 'Russian spring' began with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and continued with Russia's substantial involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The impact of these events was profound, not only because they ignited the active conflict between Russia and Ukraine, but also because many Russian combatants and volunteers perceived their participation as an 'act of initiation.' For many participants, involvement in these events represented a rare opportunity to engage in a significant historical event, proving their masculinity and achieving dignity as heroes, in stark contrast to the limited opportunities within Russian society for engaging in real politics or earning substantial income.

Russian men who volunteered to support the 'Russian spring' were motivated by a range of factors, from a desire to revive the USSR to aspirations of financial gain and the allure of a thrilling adventure. However, a theme that runs throughout their discussion is that of proving masculinity and achieving agency remained predominant.

Nearly all leaders of the 'Russian spring,' both those from Russia and from pro-Russian local figures in Ukraine, demonstrated political ambitions after gaining popularity among rebels and civilians sympathetic to the uprisings. It was widely believed among them that Russia would incorporate the newly proclaimed independent republics of Donetsk and Lugansk as its territories, support them financially, and allow the 'new heroes' – those

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who fought for the republics' independence – to rule them. However, when President Putin did not integrate Donetsk and Lugansk into Russia and most key figures of the 'Russian spring' were either denied power or, in many cases, murdered, the result was significant frustration among Russian radical patriots, nationalists, and militarists, particularly among those directly involved in the 'Russian spring.' They felt betrayed and humiliated. It is not surprisingly then that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that was welcomed by many 'Russian spring' veterans did not result in allegiance to Putin, but to fulfill promises to the pro-Russian people of Donbas. They wanted to 'finish what they started,' as men are supposed to act.

As exemplars of 'real men' who advocated for Russia and its citizens, the heroes of the 'Russian spring' became paragons of 'Russian traditional values.' In their writings and public speeches, they consistently emphasized that men's roles were centered around combat, while women's responsibilities were limited to housekeeping and child-rearing. For example, Alexey Mozgovoi, a key figure in the 'Russian spring,' served as a commander in the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic in Ukraine and led the pro-Russian *Prizrak* [Ghost] Brigade. Upon his brigade's capture of Achevsk, he established a 'People's Court' intended to deliver 'true' justice as an alternative to official legal systems. The court's first case involved a man accused of raping a local teenage girl. Of the 340 'judges,' 164 voted for immediate execution; however, the majority ultimately decided to send him to the front lines to 'redeem his shame with blood.' Following the verdict, Mozgovoi criticized women for 'depravity,' arguing that instead of fulfilling traditional roles as mothers and wives, young women frequent nightclubs, consume alcohol, and provoke men. He asserted, 'A woman must be the 'keeper of the hearth,' a mother. What kind of mothers will these girls who frequent nightclubs become? How will they raise children? [...] If you wish to be a faithful wife, stay at home, and engage in cross-stitching. I reiterate: I will instruct patrols to arrest any woman in nightclubs. Stay home, bake pirogi, celebrate Women's Day... It's time to remember that you are Russian' (Setdikova, 2014).

While it is often suggested that Russian combatants are primarily motivated by Putin's rhetoric and his conception of masculinity, many find inspiration in the heroes of the 'Russian spring.' In their view, these ordinary individuals championed 'truth' and the protection of Russian citizens, often associated with the valor of Russian soldiers in past conflicts. While Putin and other Russian officials face continual criticism on Z-patriotic social media platforms, the heroes of the 'Russian spring' are upheld as models of true patriotism and masculinity. Their legacies are preserved by Z-patriots and combatants through memorials, cultural works, and annual commemorations.[6] Graffiti depicting the faces of the heroes of the 'Russian spring' adorns the buildings in Ukrainian cities captured by Russian forces.[7]

It would be inaccurate to claim that Russian propaganda and Putin's policies had no impact on Russian men's inclination to join the Russian military forces or on women's support for these decisions. In some instances, they reinforced the belief that 'Ukrainian Nazis' had seized power and were mistreating Russian speakers. However, the primary

[6] The "heroes of the Russian spring" have been celebrated in numerous poems, such as: https://t.me/sbornik_stihiproza_SVO/4637, https://t.me/sbornik_stihiproza_SVO/2892; in song, for example: https://t.me/dva_majors/51384, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMYAidYd9mE&t=1s; and films, such as "Batya" [Dad] (2015), "Ego Batalion" [His Battalion] (2017), "Ego Oplot" [His Stronghold] (2019), "Prizraki. Soldaty Zabytoi Voiny" [Ghosts. Soldiers of the Forgotten War] (2021), "Ya Opyat Vernus. Slovo o Zakharchenko" [I Will Return Again. The Tale of Zakharchenko] (2021), among others.

[7] For instance, this post from Alexander Dugin's Telegram channel features a video of a man standing against the backdrop of a building in Donetsk, where the faces of the heroes of the" Russian spring" are depicted. The post commemorates the heroism of the participants in the" Russian spring:" https://t.me/Agdchan/18509.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

influence, it seems, was not ideological rhetoric, but the high salaries and numerous benefits offered to Russian combatants and their families. The financial incentives bolstered men's sense of dignity and perceived masculinity.

Through an analysis of discussions surrounding the war and men's decisions regarding their participation in the Russian military forces fighting in Ukraine as reflected in their writings and social media, I observed that only a limited portion of the rhetoric focused on ideological or political aspects. Instead, the predominant discourse centered on gender-related themes, including the demonstration of true masculinity, the fulfillment of familial responsibilities, engagement in the 'real men's world,' and the desire to escape the challenges of civilian life.

One of the most mentioned and discussed reasons involves affirming identity as 'real men' by demonstrating a commitment to their 'duty.' 'Real men' in this context engage in their responsibilities, defending their land, families, and the communities with which they identify. The nature of these communities can vary based on individual backgrounds; they may conceptualize their group as their country, a specific region, a nation, or a linguistic community.

For example, a member of the Wagner Group articulated his decision to join by stating: 'Here, you feel entirely different, not like you do in civilian life. Here, you can express yourself as a man, as a warrior. At home, you might work as a mechanic, a plumber, or perhaps a construction worker. But here, you truly contribute to the country [...] [Wagner] serves the nation's interests, and that brings happiness. There's no conflict or contradiction within [the Group]. Whenever I return home, I can look into my wife and kids' eyes with pride.' (Romanovsky, 2023, p. 20).

For some individuals, the war provided a means to confront personal insecurities about masculinity, often associated with defending the Motherland on the battlefield – a role they felt unable to fulfill due to the declining state of the Soviet and Russian military. A notable case is (Tulenkov, 2023), originally a historian who transitioned into business and later received a seven-year sentence for fraud. In 2022, he joined the Russian forces in Ukraine and explored his feelings of inadequacy in his memoir, *Storm Z: You Don't Have Another Us*, where he expressed regret for never having served in the military. Born in 1979, Tulenkov was influenced by films featuring war heroes and intelligence officers during the period of the Soviet Army's decline. By the 1990s, when Daniil reached adulthood, the Russian Army was in disarray, primarily attracting recruits from the most impoverished regions. Nevertheless, a prevailing belief in the national consciousness persisted: that the army and prison were the only true 'teachers of life.' He admitted, 'Like anyone who hasn't served, I had a complex about it. Prison eased it somewhat, but not entirely [...] Now, clad in body armor and a helmet, wielding a machine gun, I'm loading myself into a 'jihad car[8]' and heading out on a military mission. In my mind, I've ticked this box. My inner Hemingway is satisfied.' [p. 59–60].

For many Russian soldiers, the concept of proving masculinity often is tied to the notion of defending the Motherland. In this view, 'Mother Russia' has been abused by foreign powers and internal traitors following the collapse of the USSR. The full-scale war offered an opportunity for these individuals to demonstrate their masculinity by avenging past grievances and asserting their identity and dignity.

The financial motivations driving Russian men to volunteer for military service have been extensively discussed by both Russian liberal commentators and Western media. Indeed, the potential for significant financial gain from military contracts is often cited by those considering enlistment. However, to understand the full meaning of this, it is important to examine the symbolic implications of high salaries and special benefits for

[8] Russian military jargon for a Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

these individuals. In many cases, these incentives represent more than mere monetary compensation; they embody a desire to fulfill the role of the primary breadwinner, or 'head of the family.' By securing high salaries and various benefits, Russian combatants perceive themselves as achieving human dignity and enhancing their masculinity in the eyes of their families.

It is important to acknowledge that numerous volunteers have faced challenges in securing well-paying employment, and some have struggled to find any work at all. Financial difficulties, including burdensome loans, have often been sources of familial conflict and tension. Thus, for many men, the decision to volunteer is not solely an economic one; it is deeply intertwined with issues of identity, self-worth, and familial responsibilities.

Within the comments and posts on Pikabu, a platform where individuals share their experiences related to participation in the war in Ukraine or express interest in doing so voluntarily, several noteworthy observations emerge. For instance, one user remarked, 'This is the only place where individuals with limited education and knowledge can make good money.'[9] Another stated, 'I can totally understand those who go there [to the war in Ukraine] to raise money.'[10] Financial issues that pushed men to join the Russian military forces are a common topic of women's forums, too.[11] Wives of drafted soldiers frequently mentioned the financial benefits that families got, emphasizing the increased role of their men as providers. A wife of a drafted man from Kazan said, 'I work in a grocery store. I also receive a childcare allowance. We survived somehow before, not getting the benefits for families of those drafted. But it was really challenging; in tough situations, our parents helped us. We often do not have enough money, so it is great that my husband gets a decent salary now. This money is enough for our family, so Ramil is the main provider.'[12] There were also stories of men who volunteered because they were in debt for alimony and wanted to pay them off.[13]

Stanislav Bukatkin, a 25-year-old Russian combatant participated in the war in Ukraine from February to May 2022, wrote memoirs where he discussed his military experience and motivations to join Russian forces in Ukraine. Following the expiration of his contract, he undertook a mission in Africa yet remained committed to the idea of returning to Ukraine. His primary motivation was to affirm his sense of masculinity, which he believed was not 'given equally to everyone along with balls and penis' and a matter of 'personal choice and continual self-improvement' (Bukatkin, 2023, p. 3). He viewed this contract as a means to demonstrate 'real courage' and regarded it as his 'personal Golgotha.' Additionally, he saw it as the only viable option to adequately support his family and ensure a legacy. Aware of the potential for not returning home unscathed, or at all, and recognizing that his wife might not wait indefinitely for his return, he meticulously assessed the benefits his family would receive in the event of his death or injury. Bukatkin stated, 'The Special Military Operation is my cross to bear. I am merely weighing my options [whether to contract with the Ministry of Defense or the Wagner Group] to endure as long as possible and to provide as much as I can for my family' (Bukatkin, 2023, p. 175).

It is crucial to emphasize that men usually did consider the opinions of their female family members when discussing their potential enlistment in the Russian military forces in Ukraine. Similar to those who went off to war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014–2015, many Russian men signed up for combat in 2022–2023 without informing their wives or girlfriends, often disregarding their attempts to dissuade or alter their decisions. War is predominantly

[9] https://pikabu.ru/story/na_schet_svo_10848909?cid=289784064.
[10] https://pikabu.ru/story/ukhozhu_dobrovoltsem_10965930?cid=293657061.
[11] https://mom.life/post/633c72ef60d6c76ac928b572-devochki-muzh-zadumalsya-pojti-do.
[12] https://kazanfirst-ru.turbopages.org/kazanfirst.ru/s/interviews/598447.
[13] https://ngs24-ru.turbopages.org/ngs24.ru/s/text/family/2023/09/27/72749162/; https://t.me/vlada/93394.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

perceived as a 'men's world,' wherein it is not regarded as the role of women to prevent men from participating. Instead, women are expected to accept men's decisions, provide support, and await their return without attempting to intervene. Their roles are often confined to those of a Spartan wife or mother.

As an illustration of such, consider Lev Trapeznikov's book *Wagner: In the Flame of War.* Trapeznikov opens his memoir with a scene where he informs his wife of his decision to join the Wagner Group. By then, his bags were already packed, and no further discussion was considered. He describes his wife's acceptance of his decision as calm and without protest: 'She is not simply a wife to me; she is my 'partner in crime,' my faithful comrade. She resembles those ancient Spartan women who awaited their men after war campaigns, embracing all their masculine pursuits, whether in politics or war.' Only on the eve of his departure did she voice her concerns, asking tentatively over dinner, 'What if, by any chance, you are not accepted into the Wagner Group?' His response was brisk: 'Do not even hope that I will return soon!' [Trapeznikov, 2024, p. 7]. Their farewell lacked sentimentality. 'I gave my wife valuable instructions and left some requests, we hastily hugged, and I boarded the bus' [p. 7].

In Telegram channels, combatants continually complain about women whose efforts to find their men and bring them home jeopardize the secrecy and welfare of Russian soldiers[14]. These women inadvertently share personal and confidential information, such as their men's last locations, names, and regiment numbers. Russian soldiers' wives are expected to be patient, their roles confined to donations, charity work, addressing army supply gaps, and supporting their husbands. Women who meet these criteria are hailed as 'sisters,' 'real Russian women,' and 'faithful wives.'

In contrast, the 'Soldiers' Wives' movement has not garnered support from most Russian soldiers, despite widespread acknowledgment of the rotation issue – a topic of ongoing discussion and dispute at all levels of the military. Russian wives who vehemently oppose state policy and Putin's administration do not fit the idealized image of a Russian wife. Consequently, these women are swiftly labeled as foreign agents and national traitors. 'Normal wives are patiently waiting and do not organize provocations at the Red Square, yelling like wild animals. How will you and people like you look at the eyes of your husbands and heroes of the SMO?[15]' – asked one commentator reacting to the video featuring wives' protests. Others recommended 'punishing them under martial law[16],' revoking these women's citizenship, and 'throwing them out of Russia[17].'

The wives of soldiers play a vital role in welcoming their partners home, regardless of their physical or psychological condition. As previously discussed, many volunteers derive a sense of fulfillment from combat and often return only upon the expiration of their contracts or due to injury. Frequently, they choose to re-sign contracts shortly after their leave and return to the battlefield. Those who suffer severe injuries and are unable to resume combat may experience significant depression and frustration. In light of the neglect of mental health care that is typical among Russian men, these individuals can become a considerable burden on their spouses.

Moreover, the mental health challenges encountered by returning soldiers – including difficulties in managing aggression, reintegrating into civilian life, and rebuilding emotional connections with family and friends – remain largely unaddressed in public discourse. These issues, along with instances of infidelity, are often omitted from official discussions.

[14] One of the most recent examples: https://t.me/akashevarova/7744.
[15] https://ok.ru/video/7384537172658.
[16] https://t.me/DmitriySteshin/9874.
[17] https://ok.ru/group/53210361692285/topic/155831546111357.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, they are prevalent topics within women's social media groups[18], highlighting a stark contrast between the façade of restoring traditional values and the myriad silenced issues that frequently accompany the revival of archaic norms.

Conclusion

This paper employs historical contextualization, narrative analysis, and the concept of 'implicit collective memory' to investigate the motivations behind men's willingness to volunteer for the war in Ukraine as well as the reasons women may permit or even encourage this decision. Through an examination of diverse materials and sources, it is revealed that a significant impetus for Russian men enlisting is rooted in a longstanding traditionalist gender schema: 'men must fight, women must wait.' This traditional gender schema, where men engage in warfare and women wait supportively, contrasts sharply with the dynamics of World War II, to which Russian state propaganda and President Putin frequently refer. During that period, both men and women actively participated in combat and support roles, reflecting Soviet gender policies that promoted equality and the necessity of total mobilization following the German invasion of the USSR. Instead, the motivations observed in the contemporary conflict are deeply entrenched in a rural patriarchal culture that has persisted since the era of the Russian Empire and remains evident in the daily lives of the populations in Russian villages and small cities.

The revival of this traditionalist schema has been attributed to various factors, including a rise in anti-Western sentiment, the search for a distinctly Russian alternative path and identity, a prolonged 'masculinity crisis,' a collective sense of humiliation stemming from the collapse of the USSR, revanchism, widespread disillusionment with Western values, and intense propaganda promoting toxic masculinity and militarism under Putin. While the complex reasons and true motivations behind Russian men's decisions to enlist in the war in Ukraine have garnered significant attention in both Russian and Western media, further multidisciplinary research is required in this area. However, the non-material aspects of these motivations – related to the restoration of what men perceive as being a 'real man' and a 'true provider for a family' – have been substantiated in recent studies (Gudkov and Nekrasov, 2024; Gerasimenko, 2024; Snegovaya, 2024).

The primary contribution of this article to the ongoing discourse is the elucidation of the narratives and behavioral schemas that enhance our understanding of the underlying roots of the unfolding processes in Russian society. It aims to uncover cultural forces that compel individuals to risk their lives and the lives of others by becoming embroiled in the violence of Russia's war in Ukraine.

Data availability statement. Since this is an analytical paper, there is no data to be made available.

Acknowledgements. I extend my gratitude to James V. Wertsch and Irina Filatova for their meticulous reading, corrections, and numerous helpful suggestions. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their generous and insightful comments. Additionally, I thank the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund for providing me with the opportunity to work in the USA.

Disclosure statement. The substance of the content presented here has not been published previously and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.

Funding statement. The writing of this article was supported by the James S. McDonnell Foundation.

Competing interest. The author declares no competing interests.

[18] For example, in this VK group: https://vk.com/podslushano_na_svo.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

References

Anderson B (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
Arkhipov D (2023) Putin Poprosil Ubrat Zhenschin-Voenkorov S Peredovoi v Zone SVO. https://gazeta-ru.turbopages.org/gazeta.ru/s/social/news/2023/12/14/21924079.shtml (accessed: 18 3 2024).
Berntsen D and Rubin DC (2002) Emotionally charged memories across the life span: The recall of happy, sad, traumatic, and involuntary memories. *Psychology of Aging* 17, 636–652.
Berntsen D and Rubin DC (2004) Cultural life scripts structure recall from autobiographical memory. *Memory & Cognition* 32(3), 427–442.
Bukatkin S (2023) *SVOya Voina*. Samizdat: E-book.
Bulgakov M (2008) *Master and Margarita. Transl.By Hugh Aplin*. London: Oneworld Classics.
Erll A (2022) The hidden power of implicit collective memory. *Memory, Mind & Media* 1, e14, 1–e17. https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2022.7.
Faludi S (2007) *The Terror Dream: Ear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*. New York: Metropolitan/Henry Holt.
Gerasimenko O (2024) "Khochu Synu Podat Primer, Chtoby Znal, Cho Boyatsya Nechego:" Zachem Na Tretiy God Voinu Rossiyane Edut V Okopy. *Verstka*. https://verstka.media/zachem-rossiyane-edut-v-okopy (accessed: 29 1 2025)
Graf P and Schacter DL (1985) Implicit and explicit memory for new associations in normal and amnesic subjects. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 11(3), 501–518. https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.11.3.501.
Gudkov D and Nekrasov D (2024) *Tsena Zchizni: Issledovanie Gotovnosti Rossiyan Sluzchit Po Kontraktu*. Cyprus: CASE.
James W (1890) *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover.
MacIntyre A (2007) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Third Edition. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
Romanovsky K (2023) *Vosem Let S Vagnerom*. Moskva: AST.
Rubin DC and Berntsen D (2003) Life scripts help to maintain autobiographical memories of highly positive, but not highly negative, events. *Memory & Cognition* 31(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03196077.
Schank RC and Abelson RP (1977) Scripts, plan, and knowledge. In Johnson-LairdPN and WasonPC (eds), *Thinking: Readings in Cognitive Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 421–435.
Setdikova D (2014) Po Zakonam Voennogo Vremeni. https://www.svoboda.org/a/26675853.html (accessed: 18 March 2024).
Snegovaya I. (2024). Kak Rossiiskie Materi i Zheny Zastavlyaut Rodnyh Idti Na Voiny Protiv Ukrainy. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ON688dSkKnA&t=96s (Date of access: 2/26/2025)
Surkov V (2019) Dolgoe Gosudarstvo Putina: O Tom, Chto Zdes Voobsche Proiskhodit. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html.
Tarasov A (2024) *Skvoznoi Oskolok. Novaya Gazeta*, 1/19/2024, No. 38, pp. 10–15.
Trapeznikov L (2024) *Vagner - V Plameni Voiny. St*. Petersburg: Izdatelsky Dom Leningrad.
Tulenkov D (2023) *Shtorm Z – U vas Net Drugikh Nas*. Moskva: Yauza.
Vitkine B (2021) Génération Navalny: être jeune et rebelle en Sibérie sous Poutine. https://www.lemonde.fr/m-le-mag/article/2021/05/07/generation-navalny-etre-jeune-et-rebelle-en-siberie-sous-poutine_6079409_4500055.html (accessed: 17 March 2024).
Wertsch JV (2021) *How Nations Remember. A Narrative Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Wertsch JV (2022) The narrative tools of national memory. In H. L. Roediger III and J. V. Wertsch (eds.), *National Memories. Constructing Identity in Populist Times*. Placeholder TextPlaceholder TextNew York: Oxford University Press.
Zayonchkovskaya Z (2000) *Rossiya: Migratsia V Raznom Masshtabe Vremeni*. Moskva: Tsentr Izucheniya Problem Vynuzhdennoi Migratsii v SNG.

Maria Kurbak is a former senior fellow at the Institute of World History, Russian Academy of Sciences, and a lecturer at the National Research Institute – Higher School of Economics, Moscow. She is currently a postdoctoral research associate in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences and Global Studies Program at Washington University in St. Louis, MO, USA.

Cite this article: Kurbak M (2025) 'Men must fight, women must wait': The war in Ukraine and Russian traditionalism. *Memory, Mind & Media* 4, e2, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2025.2