

MEMORY OF THE WAR AND SUPPORT FOR THE WAR: NARRATIVES OF THOSE SEARCHING FOR UNBURIED SOLDIERS IN RUSSIA

НАСТОЯЩИЙ МАТЕРИАЛ (ИНФОРМАЦИЯ) ПРОИЗВЕДЕН,
РАСПРОСТРАНЕН И (ИЛИ) НАПРАВЛЕН ИНОСТРАННЫМ
АГЕНТОМ ЯСАВЕЕВЫМ ИСКЭНДЭРОМ ГАБДРАХМАНОВИЧЕМ,
ЛИБО КАСАЕТСЯ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ ИНОСТРАННОГО АГЕНТА
ЯСАВЕЕВА ИСКЭНДЭРА ГАБДРАХМАНОВИЧА[^]

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Iskender Yasaveev*

*Iskender Yasaveev**, independent researcher, Russia. yasaveyev@gmail.com.

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This article examines search work in Russia—the search for and identification of the unburied remains of soldiers fallen during World War II—as a *lieu de mémoire* undergoing transformations during the Russia-Ukraine war. The study focuses on statements obtained during semistructured interviews with Russian searchers (*poiskoviki*) who in one way or another support the war with Ukraine about these two wars, their similarities and differences, the memory of World War II in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, the motives for supporting the war with Ukraine, and the prospects for searching for and exhuming the bodies of those killed in this war. The memory of World War II formed by pro-war participants in the search movement is characterized by the glorification of all Red Army soldiers and the reconstruction of the heroic circumstances of their death. The fact that the Red Army soldiers were left unburied is justified by the postwar devastation. Pro-war searchers accept Kremlin’s framing of the war with Ukraine as a fight against Nazism, which resonates with their negative attitude toward Nazism in relation

* Здесь и далее * указывает на то, что отмеченные лица/организации внесены Минюстом РФ в реестр иностранных агентов. (From here on, * indicates that the denoted persons/organizations have been listed in the register of foreign agents by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.)

to World War II. From a site of tragic memory, associated with the idea of injustice toward soldiers who were left unburied, the search work turns into a site of heroic memory, quasi-religious worship of soldiers' remains, and glorifying reconstructions. The memory of World War II, formed by pro-war searchers, conveys the values of self-sacrifice, duty, and patriotism in the meaning of loyalty to authorities and the need to fight for the country, which corresponds to the interests of the Kremlin.

Keywords: Social Memory of War; Search Movement; Searchers; World War II; Cult of the Great Patriotic War; Russia-Ukraine War

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a civic movement in Russia whose members search for unburied soldiers from World War II. The unburied remains of Red Army soldiers and officers are found in many locations where fighting took place. The participants in the movement, also known as searchers (*poiskoviki*), work at the sites of battles between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in 1941–1945, the Soviet Union and Finland in 1939–1940, and the Soviet Union and Japan in 1938, 1939, and 1945. They search and recover the remains of soldiers from the dirt, craters, collapsed trenches, or unmarked sanitary and battlefield graves and then try to establish the soldiers' identities.

Participants of search expeditions are one of the agents of memory about WWII, creating their own narratives about what happened during and after the war. Their memory of the war is not, however, a collective "living" memory in the sense in which Maurice Halbwachs ([1950] 2005) used the term. The searchers who began extensive search operations in the 1980s were mostly grandchildren of WWII veterans. Therefore, the memory of the war they created is part of the war's diverse and changing social memory, which transmits values and identities (Ferretti 2005:137), is embedded in the idea of the "proper" nature of social action, and shapes certain patterns of behavior based on the past (Rozhdestvenskaya and Semenova 2011). In historian Pierre Nora's terms, search work is a *lieu de mémoire*. Nora uses this concept, which literally translates as a "site of memory," to refer to commemorative practices, not so much to locations or material objects: "A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (1999:79). Nora posits that such sites of memory combine the material, the symbolic, and the functional and that their principal feature is a desire to commit something to memory, an "intent to remember." According to Nora, "*lieux de mémoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications" (41).

Memories of WWII, the largest and most tragic war in human history, may presumably influence attitudes toward Russia's full-scale war with Ukraine that broke out on February 24, 2022. Some searchers spoke out against this war, but they were few in number and inconspicuous due to the persecution by Russian government of antiwar statements and actions. Another, more visible group supports the "special military operation," or the SMO, as the war is called by the Russian authorities and loyal citizens.

The starting point for this study was a lack of understanding on my part of how the searchers' knowledge of the tragic consequences of WWII could be reconciled with support for the war in Ukraine. Since 1993, I have participated in expeditions with the

search unit the Snow Paratroopers of the Department of History of Kazan State University—Gymnasium 122 active in Novgorod Oblast, initially as a regular searcher and, since the 2010s, as deputy unit commander. My involvement in the search work was initially motivated by my interest in the unit and the friendships with fellow searchers. Later, I came to understand the meaning of the search work and attempted to articulate it for myself: People must be buried, and if there is any possibility of finding unburied soldiers, establishing their names, and informing their relatives of their fate, then it must be done. Until recently, my identities and roles as a sociologist and a searcher have not overlapped. It was only in the second half of the 2010s, after I had become somewhat emotionally detached from the search work, that I began to study it. The initial impetus for this research was a desire to understand why people with search experience similar to mine support the war with Ukraine.

This lack of understanding has led to attempts to posit questions in the field of war memory studies: How do searchers, who are directly involved in dealing with the aftermath of WWII by searching for and recovering the remains of unburied soldiers, explain their support for Russia's war with Ukraine? How do they resolve the contradiction between such support and the memory of WWII as a tragedy that developed during the previous periods of search work? What are the characteristics of the memory of WWII as formed by pro-war searchers? How is the meaning of search work as a site of memory changing during the Russia-Ukraine war?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This work is at the intersection of several research areas. One of them is the study of memories of WWII. Within this framework, scholars demonstrate that since the early 2000s, Russia has witnessed a revival of the cult of the Great Patriotic War, defined by Nina Tumarkin as "an organized system of symbols and rituals driven by political imperatives determined by its managers" (1994:110) that had emerged in the USSR in the mid-1960s. Olga Malinova, who has studied the Russian authorities' framing of the Great Patriotic War in the 1990s and 2000–2016, argues that since 2000 "the official triumphalist narrative of the war was cleansed of any negative aspects associated with the totalitarian regime (Stalinist repressions, the failures and incompetence of the Soviet military leadership, its indifference to the human costs of military success)" (2017:65). Existing works highlight a complex picture of the ongoing processes of intertwining the official, collective, and individual (family) memories of the war against the backdrop of widespread dissemination of "victory iconography and the aggressive forms of the cult of Victory" (Gabowitsch 2020a; see also Gabowitsch 2020b).

Another area of research is death studies. In the context of this article, historical examinations of attitudes toward the bodies and remains of those who perished in the USSR are of particular importance. In her book on the instrumentalization of death in Soviet Russia, Svetlana Malysheva writes about the contrast between Soviet death culture, on the one hand, and the ideas of duty to the dead and their memory, the obligation to care for their graves, and the country's responsibility for the identification and return home of the remains of any soldier who has given life for their country, on the

other (2019:18): “The passing of people and graves into oblivion, obscurity, reticence, dilapidated and abandoned cemeteries, imperfect registration procedures, and sometimes indifference of the state, society, and people toward graves and burial sites. This has long been a reality of Soviet and Russian death culture” (19).

Anna Sokolova explores in detail the processes of desemanticization, the de-meaning, of death in the early Soviet period—from 1918 to the 1930s—and the exclusion of ordinary people’s deaths from public view. “The Soviet state,” she writes, “minimized its interest in the fates and misadventures of the dead, whom it did not consider ‘outstanding,’ but with whom a significant portion of the USSR’s population—their families and friends—had to deal daily” (2022:390). Her work highlights the attitudes toward death and the dead bodies of ordinary citizens in the USSR, shaped by the World War I and the Civil War, the Bolshevik utopia, and the collapse of funeral services as a social institution integrated with the church: “For the new human in the new world being built after the revolution, a place for death was not provided at all” (59). These studies provide insight into the historical context of the phenomenon of soldiers being left unburied.

The search movement itself, the meanings of the search work as articulated by searchers, and the differences between the searchers’ narratives and the authorities’ rhetoric regarding their work have been studied by a number of scholars. Tumarkin, who examined the cult of the Great Patriotic War in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia and participated in search expeditions in the early 1990s near Rzhev in western Russia, writes that the search movement began with the realization that the state had failed to fulfill its duty to the fallen soldiers. According to her, search work reveals how little thought the high command of the Soviet armed forces had given to the lives of its soldiers. On the contrary, excavations aimed at collecting the soldiers’ remains are, to Tumarkin, a direct manifestation of the respect and remembrance for the fallen: “A sense of duty and connection to truth, to history, to the dignity of every human individual—these have inspired the years of work put in by volunteers who were and are trying to take direct action to right the wrongs of the past” (1994:26).

Contradictions between patriotism and the search movement were analyzed by Marlene Laruelle, who studied patriotic youth clubs in Russia. In one of her interviews, the commander of a search unit says that they receive municipal funding as part of the state patriotic education program but that young people involved “become unpatriotic” once they realize that the state has failed to provide graves for all those who died for their country. Laruelle notes a major gap between youth patriotic club members’ narratives and practices, including search units, and “those expected by the Kremlin—wherein a ‘true patriot’ actively supports the regime, believes in the state as responsible for the common good, applies the state’s recommendations in his or her everyday life, and would be potentially ready to fight for the country” (2015:9).

Johanna Dahlin, who studied search expeditions using participant observation, defines them as emotional work and memory work: “The glamorous image of the war displayed at the public Victory Day celebrations is contrasted [by searchers] with the horrible images unfolding in the woods and bogs. . . . The objective of the unit’s official dissemination is not only to spread knowledge of the war, but also to deepen

the official picture with poignant examples of the very high cost of that victory” (2018:33). The search work, in the scholar’s words, gives “firsthand experience of war and loss” (37). Dahlin also examines the complex relationship between patriotism and the search movement. In her opinion, the central point of patriotism is loyalty to the state and its institutions. However, searchers’ position is characteristically ambivalent: They are loyal, but the search movement arose precisely because the state had failed to fulfill its obligations to the soldiers who died for it: “The betrayal of those left on the battlefields is lifted [by the search movement] to the foreground” (2017:1086). Dahlin writes about the conflict within the search movement, between loyalty and criticism of the state as well as the tension and internal ambivalence toward warfare and the country.

Ekaterina Melnikova researched the pathfinders’ movement (*dvizhenie sledopytov*) of the 1960s–1980s in the USSR, including search work. She proposed distinguishing between the “heroizing” and the “romanticizing” models of the search movement based on their relationship to state memory policy. The heroizing model agrees with this policy and presents search work as part of the “military-patriotic education.” In contrast, the romanticizing (a provisional term) model problematizes the state’s “forgetfulness” toward the soldiers who died for it and emphasizes the work of searchers as a civic initiative that compensates for such forgetfulness (2018:21–22).

Natalia Goncharova and Iskender Yasaveev* (2021) studied the search movement in the second half of the 2010s and compared meanings of search work as interpreted by the authorities and the searchers themselves. The searchers spoke of injustice toward the dead and unburied soldiers, their resentment on their behalf, and their desire to remedy this injustice. Some public statements made by searchers in the 2000s and 2010s include anti-war remarks. Their view of war as a tragedy is boosted by their work in searching for and recovering remains, often scattered and fragmented, and of uncovering the circumstances of death, the scale of losses, and the suffering of soldiers’ families.

According to Svetlana Eremeeva’s conclusions, searchers can be viewed as a stable memorial group representing a “countermemory” of the war, distinct from the official memory. However, the scholar notes that the Russian authorities’ desire to regulate its functioning leads to the erosion and destruction of this version of memory (2021:163). This study zeroes in on this issue and addresses changes in the memory of WWII as presented by Russian searchers during the ongoing war with Ukraine.

Existing studies of the search movement point to its contradictory relationship with the authorities, the official memory of the war, and its internal conflicts and heterogeneity. It seems that it would be well worth examining the fragmentation of both the search movement and the memory of WWII that it forms in the context of the full-scale war with Ukraine.

METHODOLOGY

Empirical data was obtained through semistructured interviews conducted between August 2023 and July 2024 among participants in the search movement with an extensive search experience. In most cases, this experience amounted to 30–35 years.

The searchers selected for the study were those who have, in one way or another, supported open warfare with Ukraine: through posts or reposts on social media, “Z” or “V” symbols on their clothing (these symbols were painted on Russian military vehicles at the beginning of the full-scale war), statements in the media, involvement in the manufacturing of “trench candles,” camouflage nets, food kits for military personnel, and the delivery of collected goods and products to military units on the front lines. In some cases, support was sporadic and limited to one or two reposts on social media at the start of the full-scale war in February 2022; in others, support was ongoing and substantial.

The respondents were informed that the interviews were being conducted for the purpose of studying the search movement as a form of remembrance of the war and the changing significance of this remembrance in the present day. No one refused to be interviewed after the request was made. Some of my interviewees were presumably aware of my status as a “foreign agent,” assigned to me by Russian government in 2022, and my antiwar position, which may have influenced their responses. However, during the interviews, respondents were open and communicative, perceiving me not only as a sociologist but also as a fellow searcher who understood them and their search work. This caused internal difficulties during the interview, as I wondered whether my usual affirmative nods and interjections of “uh-huh/yeah” would be perceived as a sign of attention or agreement to what was being said. I was grateful to my informants for their openness but refrained from expressing my own position or my attitude toward the war with Ukraine either before or after the interviews, about which searchers did not ask any questions.

In the course of the study, 15 interviews were conducted with searchers aged 33 to 76: 5 women and 10 men. The interviews were conducted during one-on-one meetings in cafés, schools, museums, and on the premises of search organizations. An average interview lasted two hours. Among my informants were commanders of search units from various federal subjects of Russia, heads of regional branches of the all-Russian civic movement Search Movement of Russia, and searchers whose day job involved working in schools and museums, including museums of the Great Patriotic War. It is important to note that at the time of interviews, almost all participants in the study were employed at government-funded institutions.

During the research period, I participated in burials, meetings of search unit representatives (“commanders’ councils”), the openings of Watches of Remembrance (search expeditions), and searchers’ conferences. This was not participant observation in a strict sense: I was a member, not a researcher. However, my observations during these events and recorded in the form of field notes were also used in writing the article.

When conducting interviews and transcribing them, I took into account the possibility that Russian law enforcement agencies might have access to correspondence, audio recordings, and transcripts in connection with arrests and searches, accompanied by the seizure of my mobile devices, computer equipment, and data storage devices, in 2022–2024. However, I assessed the risks to my informants as insignificant, since they held a pro-war position and the interviews were initially transcribed in an anonymized form.

THE RISE OF THE SEARCH MOVEMENT

The search movement for WWII battlefields began in the mid-1980s USSR in response to the contradiction between the official cult of the Great Patriotic War with its slogan “No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten” and the fact that many fallen soldiers and officers of the Red Army remained unburied. War participants explained that bodies of Red Army soldiers were left where they fell because there had been no resources or opportunities to bury the large number of the dead (see Kondrat’ev 1979:17–18). War veterans were able to start speaking openly about the command’s attitude toward the lives of soldiers and the scale of losses associated with it only since the late Soviet period when censorship was relaxed:

What weighed heavily on us at the front was that our commanders showed us no mercy, throwing us into ill-considered, doomed offensives, fighting without regard for losses and seeking victory “at any cost” . . . Now you think how many were sacrificed in vain. Because of incompetence, because of ambition, because they wanted to have cities taken by holidays . . . And always, always—at any cost! How many lives could have been saved if they had fought a little smarter, a little more cautiously, with a little more compassion for people. (Kondrat’ev 1990; see also Belash 1990:222)

When Tumarkin asked why so many soldiers had been left without a grave, historian and war participant Mikhail Gefter replied, “How could we have had time to bury our dead, . . . when every moment that we weren’t directly under fire we ourselves had orders to attack, attack, attack!” (1994:21).

After the war, areas with unburied remains, as well as battlefield and sanitary burial sites, were ploughed over during the planting of forests and cultivation of agricultural fields, the construction of roads, factories, poultry farms, pig farms, summer cottages, and other facilities. In many cases, especially in forests and swamps, bodies of soldiers and officers remained on the surface, gradually getting covered with turf and moss. Local residents became accustomed to the remains of soldiers and did not perceive this as unacceptable (Ivanova 2012:42, 106).

However, research by historians shows that the notion of complete inaction on the part of the state and indifference on the part of citizens is simplistic. Robert Dale (2021) studied archival data and revealed that in the 1940s and 1950s Soviet ministries issued a series of directives requiring local authorities to properly maintain military graves and consolidate them by transferring remains to prevent graves from being abandoned. However, these requirements were not backed up by allocation of any resources for this work. Citizens had neither the desire nor the skills nor any means of protection to work with the still-decaying bodies of soldiers or to identify them. Dale acknowledges the importance of concomitant circumstances, such as the traumatic experience of war, grief over the dead, postwar devastation, and the famine of 1946–1947. The relocation and consolidation of existing graves was faked everywhere: The remains of soldiers were transferred from separate mass and individual graves to military memorials “on paper” but in fact were left in place in the now-unmarked graves (Babanin 2014).

Since the 1950s, individual local historians in a number of Soviet regions have been systematically surveying forests to find the remains of unburied soldiers and, if a medallion could be located, inform the family. This was the approach taken by Nikolai Orlov in Novgorod Oblast, Lev Zhurin in Murmansk Oblast, Vasilii Sebin in Karelia, and others (see Melnikova 2018). However, they did not collect the unburied remains and did not bury them, except in isolated cases where the person's name could be established. In the USSR the fact that many Red Army soldiers and officers remained unburied was neither acknowledged nor openly discussed until the latter half of the 1980s.

In 1981 a student unit called the Snow Paratroopers of the Department of Philology from Kazan University arrived in the village of Miasnoi Bor in Novgorod Oblast. It was here in June 1942 that the Tatar poet Musa Jalil was taken prisoner, and the students' initial goal was to visit places associated with him. In January–June 1942 the area northwest of Miasnoi Bor was the line of the offensive and the subsequent attempts to break out of the encirclement by the Soviet Second Assault Army. Tens of thousands of soldiers perished here, their bodies remaining where they fell for 40 years. The students saw the servicemen's unburied remains in the forest and decided to continue coming here to collect and bury the bodies (Cherepanov 2006). The searchers describe their shock at what they saw during their initial expeditions to the battlefield in the 1980s, when unburied soldiers lay on the surface under a layer of leaves and moss: "When we went to the Valley [of Death], what did I learn about the war? It had truly seemed to me that 'no one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten'; I had always thought so. It was a shock to me, I remember, it was a terrible shock to me that people were lying there like that, unburied, right on the surface" (F., 55¹).



Figure 1. The beginning of excavations near the village of Miasnoi Bor, September 2010 (photo by the author)

¹ From here on, "F." or "M." stands for "female" or "male" informant, and the number indicates their age. In cases of identical ages, informants were differentiated by adding the digits 1 and 2 to their ages.

Starting from the mid-1980s, search units have been recovering the remains of the Red Army soldiers lying under the turf (figure 1) and in craters, regardless of whether they could be identified or not, and burying them in mass graves. Initially, in 1985 and 1986, this was done unofficially (see Pestretsov 1986), and later on with the help of local authorities. This approach was taken by search units from the Tatar ASSR, the Dozor search unit from Moscow (Lishin and Lishina 1990), and others. The question of why soldiers were buried in mass graves (see figure 2), rather than individually, was not raised by the search units. Firstly, this was in line with the burial practices popular in the USSR (see Malysheva 2017, 2019). Secondly, in the early years of their work, searchers found bodies of many unburied soldiers, numbering in the thousands. Thirdly, the vast majority of the bodies remained unidentified. Medallions—capsules with paper inserts—were found by search expedition participants in approximately 10 percent of cases. Whenever they managed to read the inscription on the medallion or to establish the name from a signed item, searchers looked for the family and told them about the soldier's fate, place of death, and grave location.



Figure 2. Before the burial at the memorial in the village of Miasnoi Bor, May 2021 (photo by the author)

With the onset of glasnost—the gradual lifting of censorship restrictions during the reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev—the issue of the unburied Red Army soldiers and officers began to be discussed in Soviet newspapers (Cherepanov 1987; Chudakov 1987) and on television. Since 1989, with funding from the Komsomol, support from the USSR Ministry of Defense (in the form of equipment, supplies, and military personnel), and participation of numerous search units, several large-scale expeditions have been carried out under the name of Watch of

Remembrance—in 1989 near the village of Miasnoi Bor in Novgorod Oblast, in 1990 in three districts of Smolensk Oblast, and in 1991 in 12 regions on the territories of modern Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The geography and results of these and subsequent expeditions, including those to the Lake Khasan and Khalkh River (in Mongolia) and to Sakhalin Oblast—the sites of battles with the Japanese army in 1938, 1939, and 1945—revealed that leaving fallen Red Army soldiers unburied was a widespread practice. This partially explains why such a significant number of Soviet soldiers went missing during WWII: 2.4 million people, according to official estimates (Prezident Rossii 2009). Statistics compiled by the All-Russian Information and Search Centre, located in Kazan', show that the ratio of identified soldiers to those who remain unknown is extremely low. In nearly 40 years of search work, from 1985 to 2024, searchers have buried and reburied the remains of about 577,000 soldiers fallen during WWII, deciphered 8,740 soldiers' medallions, and identified 25,379 servicemen through a variety of means, such as medallions, awards, documents, signed personal belongings, aircraft serial numbers, and archival data (Vserossiiskii informatsionno-poiskovyi tsentr 2024).

The salient point of the searchers' interviews, books, stories, poems, and songs was the injustice done to the fallen and unburied soldiers and their families (see Goncharova and Yasaveev* 2021). Another key theme was that war was a tragedy that must never be repeated. As searcher Stepan Lishin formulates, "We have worked our whole lives to ensure that this never happens again, so that people understand what war is" (*Smerti net* 2020:160; see also Lishin and Lishina 1990:99; Shcherbina 2016:73; Cherepanov 2017:3; Erkhov 2017). The searchers spoke about this in documentaries and interviews in the media:

Nikolai Usanov, commander of the KAMAZ search unit, 2016: "Here in our museum, we do our best to talk about that war through the lens of (*sighs*) death, filth, and blood. War is bad. . . . We talk about war for this reason: If we forget about war, it may return, death will return, bloodshed will return. Therefore, we will talk about the war so that it does not happen again. We do not want war." (*Pamiati poiskovika* 2022)

The search movement gradually changed from the mid-1980s onward. These changes had less to do with the conditions of the search work—the gradual decrease in the number of soldiers left lying on the surface and the deterioration of the remains—and more with the relationship between the searchers and the state.

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SEARCH MOVEMENT AND THE STATE IN RUSSIA

The search movement in the USSR and Russia can be roughly divided into three periods, distinguished by the relationship between the state and the searchers. The first, from the mid-1980s to 1992, can be called the period of mobilization and construction of the problem of the unburied soldiers' remains. The search movement itself became possible due to the weakening of repressive control and censorship over the

media during the period of late Soviet reforms (*glasnost*). Within three to four years, searchers managed to get the authorities to acknowledge the issue of unburied soldiers and implement their demands to get the remains buried. During this period, the relationship between the searchers and the powers that be was often conflictual and involved criticism of the authorities.

The second period, from 1992 to 2012, may be called subcultural, although the search subculture itself was formed during the first period. In 1993 the law *On the Perpetuation of the Memory of Those Who Died Defending the Fatherland* came into force in Russia, initiated by and with the participation of searchers. According to the law, the objectives of the search work are to identify unknown military graves and unburied remains, establish the names of those who died and went missing while defending the fatherland, and perpetuate their memory. However, the state did not have the resources to provide sustained support for search work, and the problem of unburied soldiers was not a priority during the post-Soviet transformations. During this period, the search movement was a small subculture with its own way of life, language, and music (songs), isolated and distanced from the state. The remaining search units continued to go on expeditions to WWII sites, usually at their own expense or sponsored by companies that supported them. Relations with the authorities were nonconfrontational, but the notion of injustice toward unburied soldiers was accompanied by mixed feelings of irritation, resentment, and pride for the search work that was being carried out by the searchers alone.

The third period began in 2012, along with Vladimir Putin's third presidential term—a time of significant strengthening of autocracy. This period can be called the time of "nationalization" of the search movement and its absorption into the cult of the Great Patriotic War, which was being revived by the authorities. Search work came to be defined by the Kremlin as "strengthening the country" and demonstrating what "true patriotism" is (Goncharova and Yasaveev* 2021). At the same time, patriotism was increasingly presented by the authorities as a willingness to fight for the country (Yasaveev* 2021). The following Putin's statement about the search work is typical:

Unfortunately, right here in the households, so to speak, remains of our soldiers are sometimes found. And I was especially impressed that they are found with weapons in their hands, turned in the direction of the enemy. They never retreated, death found them with weapons in hand, fighting as they went forward, advancing. This is exactly the love for the Fatherland that characterises our people. And this is what we should record for many years to come, for all future generations. Because this is exactly what Russia has always relied on: self-sacrifice, love for the Fatherland, especially in the difficult and trying times that our country has had to face, of which, unfortunately, there have been a lot. (Putin 2018)

Since 2012 Putin has regularly met with searchers and awarded them state medals and orders, while search associations and units have received state grants. In 2013, on the initiative of the Russian presidential administration, an all-Russian civic movement for the perpetuation of memory of those fallen in defense of the fa-

therland, the Search Movement of Russia, was created, bringing together a significant number of search units. According to its official website, by 2025 the movement will have comprised over 1,500 units. The creation of this organization reflected the state's desire to take control of the search work and commemoration, similar to the "nationalization" of the Immortal Regiment campaign—initially a grassroots initiative to hold a commemorative march with portraits of relatives who participated in WWII. The searchers did not resist the Kremlin's control over the search movement and its use for political purposes. The authorities' turn toward the searchers—the president's meetings with them, government awards and grants, and so on—eliminated their long-standing and voiced dissatisfaction with the state's inattention to the problem of unburied soldiers and search work.

The state, having taken control of the search movement, incorporated a significant part of the memory of the war it had formed into the official memory, excluding from it any mention of the decades of neglecting the unburied servicemen. Gradually, along with growing state support for the search movement, the notion of redressing injustice toward fallen soldiers began to be replaced by the official construct of "perpetuating their memory." Changes also occurred in the search movement's terminology: Instead of the word "burial," the word "reburial" started to be frequently used. The application of the latter term to unburied soldiers masks the fact that they were not buried. However, in recent years, search units have increasingly been exhuming and transferring remains from unmarked military graves. In this case, the term "reburial" is accurate.

The rhetorical shift toward "perpetuating the memory" and the "reburial" coincides with changes in practices: The work of recovering remains has become more painstaking and detailed, with brushes and other archaeological tools now being used at excavation sites. New rituals have emerged, such as kneeling before coffins with remains prior to their interment. The attitude of searchers toward the remains becomes increasingly similar to that toward sacred objects in religious worship, such as the veneration of relics in Christianity.

NARRATIVES OF SEARCHERS SUPPORTING THE WAR WITH UKRAINE

On February 27, 2022, three days after Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine, the coordinating council of the Search Movement of Russia issued a statement supporting the "special military operation" (Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii 2022), in agreement with the Kremlin's concept of Nazi rule in Ukraine. However, searchers, just like Russian citizens in general, had mixed reactions to the Kremlin's actions. Konstantin Dobrovolskii, chairman of the council of search units in Murmansk Oblast, spoke out against the war (Britskaia and Artemieva 2023; Hopkins 2023). Some searchers left Russia after February 24 and the beginning of military mobilization in September 2022. One of them was Viacheslav Skokov, head of the Karel'skii val search unit (Paananen 2022). In private conversations and in correspondence, searchers, including unit commanders, told me about their disagreement with the war and their

forced silence. A significant segment of the search movement's participants did not comment on what was happening and did not express their attitude toward the war on social media. At the same time, a substantial number of searchers supported the "SMO." There are known searchers who volunteered to take part in the hostilities. At the time of writing, some have been wounded, killed, or gone missing.

MEANINGS OF SEARCH WORK

Semistructured interviews with the searchers who support Russia's war against Ukraine revealed the semantic constructs they create in relation to search work, WWII, and the Russia-Ukraine war. Some of the questions touched upon the understanding of search work. In contrast to the meanings previously assigned to search work by its participants—in particular, redressing injustice toward fallen soldiers and their families—the statements of the searchers supportive of the war with Ukraine turned out to be similar to the Kremlin's rhetoric with its constructs of "true patriotism," the development of pride in the country, and the heroization of all war participants:

There is much to be proud of, for them [searchers] this [search work] is an opportunity to find another reason to be proud. For themselves, too, that they went there [to the former battlefield] and made such a contribution, to have had 200–300 servicemen reburied, and their relatives coming, too, and with that they understand perfectly well what a great accomplishment it was at the time. (M., 49)

In statements by pro-war searchers, search work takes on the meaning of convincing others of the need to fight, just as their "forefathers" fought during the Great Patriotic War:

People still need, like, to know about their fallen relatives. Not just where they died or where they are buried, which is important in and of itself, but many try to find out how they died. Somewhere in their hearts, they wonder: Did he fight? He wasn't a traitor, was he? That is . . . And when you provide people with this information, well, consider yourself to have achieved a great thing. That's what's important. And depending on how people feel, how people relate to the memory of their ancestors, whether he was a traitor and fought for Vlasov [a Red Army general turned Nazi collaborationist], and I am ashamed of that, or I keep mum about it and I am the enemy. Well, this doesn't add to patriotism. And most of the missing in action are those who really fought—and fought to the end. And if this information is made available to their families, more people will understand that if their forefathers had fought for this land, then they, too, must do so. (M., 55_1)

Only in one case was the work of searchers referred to as the work of a "burial service" and distanced from patriotism: "There is no patriotism here—we are looking for unburied soldiers, trying to lift [recover] them, to find them, and then to bury them. We are but undertakers, just ordinary undertakers" (M., 65). "Undertakers" and/or "burial service" are the terms that were repeatedly used by the searchers in early periods of the search movement to describe the essence of their work.

The searchers I interviewed interpreted the events and findings of search work in accordance with the heroic image of self-sacrifice. Like the authorities, they glorify all participants of the Great Patriotic War on the Soviet side with no exceptions, regardless of their actions and position during the war (on the front lines, in headquarters, in the rear, etc.). In some cases, the heroization of soldiers is based on the mere fact of their participation in active combat:

I tell the children: To me, they are all heroes, because to me, a hero is not necessarily someone who rushed to cover the embrasure of a dugout, but simply someone raising their head from the trench. Because your instinct for self-preservation has to be turned off, right, so that you can get out and go on the attack. So that you forget that you have children out there or, on the contrary, that you are acutely aware that you have children, I don't know. To me, they are all heroes. (F., 55)

In other cases, searchers reconstruct the heroic actions and circumstances of the soldiers' deaths based on their findings:

There is a single rifle pit there. And in the pit, a soldier is crouching, the one who defended this dugout [with the wounded]. He has a rifle in his hands, the bolt all the way forward, and three spent cartridge cases. He has no more ammunition; they were in encirclement, the 33rd [Army]. And so we lift him too, he's got a helmet, a rifle in his hands, everything is there. . . . We start to lift him up, and in his decayed breast pocket we find . . . a lipstick, as it turns out. It is in perfect condition, perfectly preserved. The very edge of it was smudged, and it was clear that this girl had only used it once. And then we found a medical bag at the bottom under this soldier, and there, among the decayed first-aid kits and some medicines, were homemade wooden curlers. Curlers, to curl hair. This was a girl, a nurse. And so, when I tell the lads about this, I say: Just imagine, she's alone, and the Germans are coming out of the woods, and she has three bullets. She could throw down her rifle and come out with her hands up. And no one would see her, no one. But behind her are the wounded. And so she takes up the fight, with three bullets, alone against everyone. How is that possible?! (M., 56)

Reconstructions of soldiers' heroic deeds are disseminated by search units in meetings with various audiences, including children and young people. However, any reconstruction of the events based on the nature and position of skeletal remains, personal belongings, weapons, and ammunition found is probabilistic. Things could have taken place differently and in a different sequence compared to the versions created by searchers based on the excavation details. In the case described above, with the discovery of a nurse in a single rifle pit with three spent cartridge cases, other scenarios are possible: Cartridge cases in the pit could have been left over from another battle, the nurse's body could have been carried to the pit after her death, and so on.

Another reconstruction by my interviewee, a searcher, on the basis of the number of cartridges found together with the remains, appears even more far-fetched:

Look, we find soldiers with lots of spent cartridge cases, guns intact, and they're dead. What does that tell us? It tells us that they fought to the end. In Volgograd, there was a case where we dug up a trench and found the remains of two soldiers. One had two bullets in his pocket, and another did too. Well, a "pocket" is an approximation. Why? So that if necessary, one could shoot himself and his friend in the forehead, so that they wouldn't suffer. That's how it is, isn't it, that's how it should be? The lads learn a lot from this, even that they fought like that, exactly like that. They stood on the front lines. They learn a lot from these expeditions; they change completely. Of course, we learn about the war. (F., 76)

Our search unit found several soldiers with grenades in their hands who had died in battle. In one case, we found an open magazine of a submachine gun with a hand bone inside. The soldier must have died while reloading the magazine. Later, we were able to establish his name from a medallion we found: Ivan Martynenko, born in 1905, from the Ukrainian SSR. In most cases, however, we cannot establish the circumstances of soldiers' deaths: whether this was an air raid, artillery fire, bullet or shrapnel wounds, blood loss, exhaustion, or execution. In many cases, we find no weapons or personal belongings in the excavations, and often no shoes either, which means that the soldiers were stripped of their shoes and clothes after death.

The notion of injustice toward the fallen soldiers ("abandoned and forgotten"), typical of the early period of the search movement, was almost completely absent in interviews with the searchers who support the war with Ukraine. My respondents did not dwell on the fact that servicemen had been left at the site of their death and not buried by the state, but only characterized the situation in which many a soldier had gone missing as negative ("bad"). The searchers themselves justified the phenomenon of leaving bodies unburied by the circumstances of postwar devastation and the lack of resources and means to bury the dead:

After the war, the country could not afford to devote even minimal resources to burials in places that at that time were, let's say, "not an impediment." All resources were devoted to reconstruction. And only later, when an opportunity arose, yes, then . . . people either organized themselves or, in some cases, with the help of the state, in some cases military units . . . although more than 10 years had passed after the war before they finally got around to doing this work. . . . Not because there was no will. (M., 55_1)

Neglecting the unburied dead is justified by the interests of the living:

Immediately after the war, it was necessary to rebuild, because 70 percent of the territory had been, well, devastated. It seems to me that all efforts were focused on this. Perhaps this was the primary concern—to ensure a normal life for the living. At that time, it was probably not possible to focus on the dead. It was necessary to think about the living, those who remained. (F., 55)

My interviewees renounce the claims against the state that were characteristic of the first and second periods of the search movement. This renunciation is justified by the searchers' presumed knowledge of the war: "We don't really rebuke our state

for, like, whatever, like the searchers used to do before: 'They abandoned everyone in the woods.' That's how people with no war experience talk about it. Sometimes there's really just no time for that" (M., 55_2).

Pro-war searchers make no distinction between the first postwar decade, a time of devastation, famine, and trauma, and the subsequent decades, particularly the 1960s and 1970s, when resources for burying soldiers could be found and the work was no longer as traumatic as in the early postwar years but, nevertheless, was not carried out.

The claims that the soldiers were not buried after their death have been replaced by the rhetoric that the soldiers had been buried but over time ended up in unmarked graves:

It seemed [to the troops] that they would just finish up [the war], come back, and sort everything out. That's how it seemed after the first burial, but then you buried your second mate, then your third, and somehow, I guess, a kind of distortion set in. And when everyone returned home, they realized that the country was in an economic abyss . . . and had no time for those preliminary interments. (M., 33)

Two of my interviewees acknowledged that the state had failed in its duty to the fallen soldiers and expressed grievance on their behalf:

Everyone says that we are educating young people, kind of. But in fact, what we are showing them is how the state and society have treated their heroes, how not to behave. Seeing what has been done, how can they love the state? Why do they love it? I don't understand that. We are doing everything backward, don't you agree? (M., 58)

Some kind of resentment, after all. But why? They were just doing their duty . . . Why were they forgotten like that? Why were they abandoned like that? The war, I understand that; it's the war. (M., 65)

Thus, the main focus of the pro-war participants of the search movement is not on the injustice toward the dead but rather on their heroism and self-sacrifice. The criticism of the state for failing to fulfill its duty by not burying the servicemen who had defended it is replaced by heroic reconstructions and a narrative justifying the abandonment of the fallen.

MOTIVES FOR SUPPORTING THE WAR WITH UKRAINE

Pro-war searchers explain their support for Russia's war with Ukraine in different ways. In some of their responses, one can see an unreflective identification with one's own country: "Since the country is at war, we've got to join in" (M., 58). A number of others reproduce the Kremlin's framing of the existence of Nazism in modern Ukraine: "the same war, the same Nazis" (M., 56), "the same fascists" (M., 50), "the searchers understand, probably better than anyone else, how terrible war is in terms of tragedy and losses. But the hostility toward both Nazism and the enemy is greater"

(M., 49), “Nazism must be overcome” (F., 55). The statements about the “Nazis who rule Ukraine” were accompanied in one case by references to videos of actions from the alleged members of right-wing nationalist organizations seen on television and on social media, without the caveats that these examples do not allow to make any well-founded generalizations:

One video after another has been dropping, one after another, and when the special military operation began, you know what I thought? That all states act in their own interests. America acts in its own interests; Ukraine acts in its own interests. Why can't we act in our own interests? We are acting in our national interests; we have finally risen from our knees and started acting in our national interests. Did they promise not to expand to the east? So they did. But 15 states ended up joining [the NATO], right? . . . Why was it necessary to talk about the nuclear weapons and the fact that . . . to make it part of the constitution that Ukraine is going to join the NATO bloc? My Lord, everyone lived in peace there with their democratic values, for God's sake. But how could we give up Sevastopol [in Crimea]?! We've been there for 250 years, and here you go, now it will be a NATO base or what? That was what has suddenly made me become a citizen and a patriot. (F., 55)

Searchers adopt and reproduce the frame of “Nazism in Ukraine,” fabricated by the Kremlin, as a given. It resonates with their extremely negative attitude to Nazism as one of the causes of WWII. This attitude is manifested in the fact that not all search units and individual searchers exhume the unburied remains of Wehrmacht soldiers for transfer to German representatives, limiting themselves at best to recording their geographic position and reporting the fact and place of discovery of the remains to the regional branch of the search movement. I have witnessed cases when some searchers refused to recover the remains of Wehrmacht soldiers, and the regional search headquarters strongly advised the search party to “stop digging out the Germans.” One can assume the same agreement between the attitudes toward the German Nazism and the Kremlin's rhetoric about Nazism in Ukraine among Russian citizens in general, which somewhat explains why it was so easy for the Russian authorities to fabricate the frame of “Nazism in modern-day Ukraine,” if we were to use the terminology of Erving Goffman's frame theory (1974).

The searchers who expressed unequivocal support for the war with Ukraine were involved in various initiatives to help the army: They reposted calls to raise funds, wove camouflage nets, made bandages, “trench candles,” and “dry soups,” and traveled to the “line of contact” delivering cars, generators, and goods, which they called “humanitarian aid,” to Russian military units. Such actions are a consequence of support for the war with Ukraine and, in turn, strengthen the participants' position through a collective commitment, within the framework of supporting communities.

Pro-war searchers also faithfully reproduce the anti-Western “geopolitical” narrative:

Why does everyone hate us so . . . Well, I think it's simple, the answer is simple: The country is just big, it's too rich and large a country, and this is vexing to

them. That's it. And look at the entire history—whoever came from the west, they all failed. . . . Because to look at the dead and at what is happening there now, we are now saying it's like 1943 all over again, well, that's our comparison, for example. As usual. Two years ago it was 1941, when, of course, we were . . . We thought it would be an easy victory, as always, damn it. And nothing works like that. Considering that we are now at war with the entire NATO—all of it, you might say. Not to mention their experts, training, equipment, and so on. Because in fact, if not for the NATO, it all would have ended a long time ago. Well, it's just for their benefit. That's money, plus (*sighs*) they have their own objectives there. (M., 55_2)

Searchers, as well as presumably a considerable part of Russian citizens, normalize the war with Ukraine by the premise that Russia has always opposed “the West” and what is currently happening is only one of the episodes of this confrontation. At the same time, homophobia and negative attitudes toward the rights of LGBTQ+ people being ensured in Western societies are a factor contributing to the support of this war:

And so I say, this whole system, that is liberal, it, let's say, well, by and large has nothing good about it. For a good example, damn it, let's take Europe now. Everything seems to be fine, everything is wonderful there, yes, everything is fine, damn it, but, excuse me, there are twice as many pederasts now. Why would that be so? And now they are imposing their, as they say, uh, will. We have enough of those in Russia as well, but, thank God, they aren't allowed to impose their will. Although no, I understand, deviations exist in a variety of forms, but this, well, if you like it like that, well, live as you please. But don't, damn it, turn the entire society around you, so that everyone has to live like this. (M., 50)

Support for the war with Ukraine does not mean absence of criticism of the Kremlin's actions. One of the pro-war searchers says the “SMO” has no clearly defined objectives:

When you do something, you need to understand what you are trying to achieve. I don't understand. And those guys of mine fighting there, they do not understand it, either. That is, we have not yet been told what we want to achieve. Liberate all, as we say, of Ukraine, reach the Dnieper River, liberate the Black Sea [coast] . . . We are not told what we want to achieve. (M., 56)

In a number of my informants ostensible support for the war combined with a negative attitude toward the hostilities: “Politicians are one thing, but human destinies and lives are quite another. Well, think about it, two friendly peoples are killing each other. It is still difficult to understand the losses on this side, on that side. If it were the Great Patriotic War, when losses were inevitable, as it was necessary to defend the motherland, I'd understand” (M., 63). Behind the ostensible support for the war with Ukraine, there are various positions in relation to it, from active participation in pro-war initiatives to a lack of understanding, grief for the losses, and refusal to identify the war with Ukraine with the Great Patriotic War.

ON DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR AND THE WAR WITH UKRAINE

The interview asked questions about the similarities and differences between the Great Patriotic War and the “special military operation.” Those searchers who may be classified as active supporters of the war with Ukraine see them as identical:

Interviewer: Can search work influence the attitude toward the “SMO”? . . .

Interviewee: I thought that it ought to, because we understand what all this Nazism has led to and what would happen to us if we do not win. But some seem to believe that the Great Patriotic War is one thing and this is totally different. No, I believe them to be one and the same. It’s the same fascism, same Nazis, only in a more sophisticated form. (F., 54)

A completely opposite opinion on equating the Great Patriotic War with the current war with Ukraine has also been clearly articulated. The following quotation shows how a searcher repeats the meanings created by the Kremlin, while at the same time refusing to equate the two wars:

If not for us, then they [Ukraine], probably, at one time, that is, would have started this thing, so to speak . . . And the fact that fascism has flourished there is not even in question, that is what is happening there. . . . Clearly, all this is being done, let’s say, by those at the top, who are programmed to be like this, supported by the United States and so on, well, it’s like everywhere else. We need to talk about it, and the kids also need to be talked to about it. But still, I don’t understand the suffering of ordinary people. It is very difficult for me to understand this. Because children are being sent from that side, and children are sent from this side. From the other side, it is not clear at all, I am generally surprised by how many thousands have already been killed. It is clear that they are also forcibly sent there. What’s in it for the other side is not clear at all. People are dying here too, well . . . Well, I don’t know, I can’t conceptualize it, I can’t think it through to the end. I understand that it is necessary. But I’ll say it again, I don’t understand the human sacrifice anyway, I can’t . . . (*says it sadly and pauses for three or four seconds*). After all, politics probably play a greater role than . . . You can never compare the Great Patriotic War and the SMO, no, never. Some parallels can be drawn, but never compare to what happened then . . . Back then, they defended the motherland there, there was an enemy, there was a specific threat to life overall. (M., 63)

Searchers see the similarity between the Great Patriotic War and the “special military operation” in the deaths and the brutality, typical of any armed conflict:

It seems to me that the similarity (*sighs*) is, in fact, in that people are cruel to the enemy. The similarity is that if they were captured, they were not considered human. Here, too, they don’t consider people to be human. And for some reason, people begin to show a certain animal instinct as a master of life and death. For example, no one else counts for anything, I am entitled to kill there, cut there, and so on. This is the case in any war. The same happened with the Germans. None of them seemed kind because they thought they were the masters. This is

the manifestation . . . Maybe it manifests itself in everyone, I don't know. Maybe not in all, but it is there, it is there. A hatred for this, for the enemy. . . . They are similar in this way. (M., 65)

A searcher with a significant experience of working in the military archives and knowledge of military history, who at the same time maintains contact with searchers on active military duty, sees similarities between the Great Patriotic War and the Russia-Ukraine war as far as the lives of military personnel are concerned:

The parallels are, again, well, let's put it this way, the attitude, I'd say, and I have already said as much, the attitude of the higher-ups to the subordinates. That is the same mess. . . . And clearly, there are some thoughtless orders there, like, whenever I want to, as I'm a regiment commander, for example, and I really want to get an award, so that my regiment would sound great, and like all these reckless orders there, like go take this firing point over there. And that's it, and people crawl up there for weeks on end, with no movement, nothing, just the wounded and the dead. That is, there are a lot of nuances there, which really to a great extent remind one of the Great Patriotic War. (M., 50)

An informant, who leads a search unit one of whose members has died in the war with Ukraine, believes that despite the lethality of the Great Patriotic War, combatants in the war with Ukraine have fewer chances of survival: "The similarity is, of course, death. As for the differences: These days, the war is conducted in a completely different way. There are these copters now, and the weapons, too. In general, it seems much harder to survive now than it did before" (F., 49).

PROSPECTS FOR SEARCH WORK IN PLACES AFFECTED BY THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Searchers are giving a lot of thought to future search work in the areas of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine. Their statements reflect an awareness of how many unburied bodies of servicemen are there and what is happening to them:

I have a lot of guys still fighting, officers. And so, they say, well, both Black people and ours are left in the field, and we can't get them out, everything is under fire. If you go, you'll be . . . Who will go? So they lie there for months. And then the shelling begins, they're like this . . . (*demonstrates with his hands*) all will be mixed up there. What do we want, a war is a war. (M., 65)

My informants discern one more similarity with the Great Patriotic War in the fact that unburied soldiers remain where they fell, but they make light of it:

Now the war is ongoing, and what? The same thing—they are lying there, and for two months straight one cannot remove them. The same thing is happening: unidentified graves, and all that. And now the task is to record all this somehow. Wherever they were buried and the place was marked on the GPS, it is essential now to collect this data. We already have people doing this little by little. For example, I have here (*takes a sheet of paper from the table*). A father . . . [name

of an army unit formed in a specific subject of the Russian Federation], when ours were bombed in February. Now in this place . . . (*flips through the papers*), there are probably about 80 dead here. This is the father of a soldier who died there. He wants him to come home. They were all hastily buried there. Now there is a place for them, there's everything. As soon as they push them [the enemy] out, all of us here [name of an ethnic group] will bring them here. (M., 55_2)

My respondents have repeatedly used the word “mess” (*bardak*) to describe the situation, in which bodies are abandoned and the dead cannot be identified. The searchers say that the Russian Ministry of Defense ignores the tragic experience of the past, as well as their own search experience:

An incident took place: An armored personnel carrier burned down with the servicemen inside. And now the bodies . . . One body—one bag. Well, if it's burned, one body is one bag. And the guys, apparently, just to be on the safe side, they collected them each in a bag and then put all these small bags from one armored personnel carrier into a single bag. And this Rostov laboratory, apparently, were not very smart: They took this one bag and sent it home to one of the soldiers. And the rest of the soldiers went missing. It looks like they did not separate them, well, did not look inside, did not understand. . . . The family doesn't begin to receive money until there is a body. You see? And some, thinking that . . . There are so many of them on the battlefield . . . So some, thinking that they are doing good, pull out a body that looks similar. And after several days of lying dead in the field, we all smell equally disgusting, everything is the same there. To help the family financially, they send someone to them. Does this system really work as it should? We don't know. They are saying it's still classified. We only get the rumors. But the main thing, of course, I wish for this mess, this very unpleasant mess, to have some . . . [order]. (M., 58)

The searchers having a lot of experience in identifying the remains have repeatedly raised the topic of DNA testing, thus problematizing the lack of advance DNA testing of military personnel in the Russian army:

Three hundred thousand were drafted during the mobilization. Did anyone get DNA tested?! Afghanistan, Chechnya have taught us nothing. (field notes at the All-Russian Conference of Search Unit Representatives, 2023)

Dog tags could also be removed from them. . . . Dog tags come in pairs, and many have both hanging on their necks. That is, one is removed, and one stays. But again, some do it, some don't, I don't know. You see, I'm not a military man. Why can't they just test their DNA?! Just like that. Once they drafted you, well, go get your blood drawn, here, now it's enough to have this sterile spot, here, the blood's already dry. Does it take up so much room? Let it be. The same with saliva. Damn, rub it here (*points to the inside of his cheek*), that's how we're doing it now. That is, it is elementary these days, everything is already done, that is, it is already . . . The Americans already have such little portable cases. That is, they rub your cheek, and in 40 minutes the DNA test is ready. Here is the case. That is, the technology is moving forward, so why don't you do it? Instead,

once they died, then they are identified, then their relatives are DNA-tested, and only then do they begin to compare. Test it in advance! Not a damn thing is being done. (M., 55_2)

When discussing future work in the areas of the Russia-Ukraine war, searchers say that this work will be complicated by the presence of explosives and point to the importance of working with witnesses: interviewing and collecting information about the places of servicemen's death. According to one of my informants, searchers will have to look for and exhume "both ours and the Ukrainians . . . when peace comes, peace must come" (M., 58).

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS: A TRANSFORMATION OF A LIEU DE MÉMOIRE

After the interviews, I experienced complex and conflicting feelings about the searchers with whom I had spoken. I saw them as open and caring people who at one time responded to the injustice toward the dead and unburied soldiers and their families but now support the war despite understanding what it leads to. Most of my respondents did not feel or show any doubts about their convictions, and the support for the war in their statements seemed a given. One of the searchers I had interviewed shortly thereafter voluntarily joined the "special military operation" by signing a contract with the Russian Ministry of Defense. Over the three and a half decades of search work, he found many unburied, reported missing in action soldiers of WWII. In April 2024 he himself went missing. By the time of this manuscript's completion (autumn 2025), his body has not yet been found or buried. I resented his support for the war, related actions, and death. During the study, I discovered that the search work, which I had endowed with an antiwar meaning, can be redefined by searchers in such a way that it turns into a pro-war activity.

Search work as a site of memory, in the terminology of Pierre Nora, is defined primarily by the search for unburied soldiers, even when unsuccessful: It is the intent to find and bury, to excavate and recover the remains. Other practices that form this site of memory are the burial ceremonies of the remains; the installation of memorial signs—tablets, pyramids, or stars—at places of soldiers' death; the search for the servicemen's families, the conversations and meetings with them, and joint visits to the places of death. Material objects of such a site include war memorials over the buried remains, monuments and memorial signs at the places of death, and a multivolume edition of *The Names from Soldiers' Medallions*, prepared and published by the All-Russian Information and Search Centre. Narratives, such as the searchers' statements, interviews, texts, and songs, are an important part of this site of memory.

This *lieu de mémoire* has changed significantly since the early days of the search movement. At the heart of this transformation are the changed relations with the Russian authorities, the official memory, and the cult of the Great Patriotic War. In the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, search work was distanced from the authorities and conflicted with this cult by showing how far removed its principal slogan, "No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten," was from the reality of the vast number of the un-

buried and missing soldiers. The searchers' work highlighted the attitude of the Soviet command to soldiers' lives, their bodies during the war, and the state's failure to fulfill its duty to the dead. Fieldwork and archival research together offered an understanding of the scale and circumstances of people's death in the war. The search for relatives of the fallen soldiers, meetings and interaction with them revealed the tragedy of families who had lost their loved ones and knew nothing about their fate for decades. Such finds and information contributed to the understanding of war as a tragedy, an unthinkable misfortune, and an indescribable suffering. In the 2010s, during the period of strengthening autocracy, the authorities took control of the search work through the provision of resources and the creation of the Search Movement of Russia. At the same time, the memory of the searchers began to converge with the official memory, glorifying all participants in the war, regardless of their role in hostilities.

Since the breakout of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the memory of WWII created by the Russian searchers has been represented in the public sphere by the predominantly pro-war searchers. They create heroic narratives, presenting their findings and excavation details as a testimony to the resilience and heroism of the fallen soldiers and justifying leaving the soldiers unburied by the postwar devastation and the need to rebuild the country. The memory of war as a tragedy has faded into the background. Thus, from a site of tragic memory associated with the idea of injustice inflicted on the soldiers left unburied, search work has turned into a site of heroic memory, of worshipping the remains, of aggrandizing reconstructions. If every memory construct is a system of transmission of values and identities (Ferretti 2005:137), then the memory of war as shaped by pro-war searchers transmits the values of self-sacrifice, duty, and patriotism in the sense of loyalty to the authorities and the need to fight for the country. This corresponds to the interests of the Russian power elite, which, turning to the past, creates its own desirable model of action: a willingness to fight and give one's life for the state.

Why does a significant segment of Russian searchers support the war with Ukraine in various ways? The results of this study show that searchers, much like a substantial share of Russian citizenry overall, accept the frame of Nazi rule in Ukraine fabricated by the authorities, which resonates with their own negative attitude toward Nazism in the context of WWII. In this regard, the Kremlin skillfully exploits the memory of WWII and the consequences of Nazism to justify its decision to go to war with Ukraine. In addition, the government's anti-Western rhetoric and actions are in line with some searchers' anti-Western attitudes, including a negative stance toward LGBTQ+ persons. However, many factors that may contribute to one's support for the war have been left out of this study. In particular, all my respondents are employed in the public sector, such as education or culture (museums), or receive state funding and, in this regard, are largely dependent on the state, which may have influenced their position.

Another, tragic and anti-war searchers' memory of WWII has not disappeared altogether during the war with Ukraine, but it is inconspicuous and marginal, that is to say, it is on the periphery of the searchers' site of memory.

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ПАМЯТЬ О ВОЙНЕ И ПОДДЕРЖКА ВОЙНЫ: НАРРАТИВЫ УЧАСТНИКОВ ПОИСКА НЕПОХОРОНЕННЫХ СОЛДАТ В РОССИИ

НАСТОЯЩИЙ МАТЕРИАЛ (ИНФОРМАЦИЯ) ПРОИЗВЕДЕН, РАСПРОСТРАНЕН И (ИЛИ) НАПРАВЛЕН ИНОСТРАННЫМ АГЕНТОМ ЯСАВЕЕВЫМ ИСКЭНДЭРОМ ГАБДРАХМАНОВИЧЕМ, ЛИБО КАСАЕТСЯ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ ИНОСТРАННОГО АГЕНТА ЯСАВЕЕВА ИСКЭНДЭРА ГАБДРАХМАНОВИЧА

Искэндэр Ясавеев*

*Искэндэр Ясавеев**, независимый исследователь, Россия. yasaveyev@gmail.com.

Автор признателен принявшим участие в исследовании поисковикам за их открытость, рецензентам – за ценные предложения и замечания, а также двум коллегам, с которыми обсуждал рукопись, – за помощь, вопросы и рекомендации.

В статье рассматривается поисковая работа в России – поиск и идентификация непохороненных солдат Второй мировой войны – как место памяти о войне, изменяющееся во время войны между Россией и Украиной. В фокусе исследования – полученные в ходе полуструктурированных интервью высказывания поддерживающих войну с Украиной российских поисковиков об этих двух войнах, их сходствах и различиях, памяти о Второй мировой войне в контексте текущей войны, мотивах поддержки войны с Украиной, перспективах поиска тел погибших в этом вооруженном конфликте. Память о Второй мировой войне, создаваемая провоенно настроенными участниками поискового движения, отличается героизацией всех красноармейцев и реконструированием героических обстоятельств их гибели. Оставление красноармейцев непохороненными оправдывается послевоенной разрухой. Провоенно настроенные поисковики принимают фабрикуемый Кремлем фрейм нацизма в Украине, который резонирует с их негативным отношением к нацизму в контексте Второй мировой войны. Из места трагической памяти, связанной с представлением о несправедливости по отношению к оставленным непохороненными солдатам, поисковая работа превращается в место героизированной памяти и поклонения солдатским останкам. Место памяти о Второй мировой войне, создаваемое провоенно настроенными поисковиками, транслирует ценности самопожертвования, долга и патриотизма в значении необходимости воевать за страну.

Ключевые слова: социальная память о войне; поисковое движение; поисковики; Вторая мировая война; культ Великой Отечественной войны; российско-украинская война