

**Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription, and War in Post-Soviet Russia.** By MAYA EICHLER. Pp. 239. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2012. \$80. Cloth. ISBN: 9780804776196. \$24.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9780804776202.

For many casual observers (and perhaps scholars alike), the defining image of contemporary Russian (hegemonic) masculinity comes from a viral video sensation in which a bare-chested Vladimir Putin in military garb gallops across the screen. This image of the Russian president reappears in various guises throughout Maya Eichler's fascinating new study into the processes of re-establishing militarized notions of masculinity in Putin's Russia, defined here as 'the idea that military service (and combat) are central to men's identity, whether this is understood as a citizenship duty or a necessity of male socialization' (p. 8). Within this militarized gender order, men demonstrate their claims to masculinity through their willingness to protect the nation, and women uphold their end by sending their sons off to war. However, the activism of soldiers' mothers, veterans, and an increasingly critical and independent media during the last years of the Afghan occupation and the First Chechen War contributed to an unmaking of this association. For Eichler, the task at hand is to demonstrate how universal male conscription and military service in the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras forged and challenged essentialized notions about masculinity and male citizenship, thus proving this phenomenon to be constructed rather than a reflection of the natural order. This narrative arc of de- and re-militarization undergirds each of the five chapters in Eichler's study, as she probes how political actors, post-Soviet economic transformation, the activism of soldiers' mothers, and representations of soldiers themselves each informed these processes.

Through fieldwork in Samara examining the practices of militarization from the "bottom up", Eichler's study provides a much-needed geographical reorientation away from the centre in contemporary conscription debates. In her conversations with members of two local soldiers' mothers' organizations, the *Sodeistvie* Samara Oblast' Committee of Parents of Servicemen and the *Synov'ia* Regional Voluntary Organization of Parents of Servicemen, Eichler uncovers profound complexities in the nature of their activism, previously obscured due to scholarly concentration on the more prominent Moscow and St. Petersburg-based groups. Like their metropolitan counterparts, the women in these organizations activated naturalized biological understandings of femininity as means of confronting the state in order to protect their sons from harm—a vehicle that facilitated their challenges through working inside widely accepted cultural notions of "responsible motherhood". However, unlike the more famous groups, the Samara organizations still promoted an essentialized linkage between masculinity and military service. The impetus to organize stemmed from their concerns over the conscription of their own sons for combat in Chechnya. Many members of these Samara-based groups did not even question the legitimacy of conscription practices and instead sought to advocate for conscripts' rights, demand greater accountability from military authorities, and memorialize fallen warriors. These activities complicate simple narratives of resistance or opposition placed on soldiers' mothers' groups by observers and demonstrate how some have also contributed to a revived spirit of militarized masculinity in contemporary Russian society. In her interviews with veterans of the Chechen wars, Eichler further exposes the fractures in militarized understandings of masculinity by revealing that a variety of images and experiences emerged from

these conflicts—glossed here as unwilling, excessive, fragile, unrecognized, and patriotic warriors. While patriotic education initiated under Putin sought to resurrect a unified and militarized vision of masculinity, the difficulties of post-service reintegration into a transitional market economy and failures on the part of the state to recognize *chechentsy* as proper veterans, among other myriad issues, hindered these efforts from above.

Eichler's narrative of an uncoupling of masculinity and military service in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise and its subsequent resurrection under Putin does present itself as something of a simplification at times. First of all, Eichler speaks of a greater solidarity and unified sense of purpose in the Soviet armed forces during the Afghan campaign than that found during the First Chechen War. While there may be a great deal of truth in this statement, she overlooks the fact that Soviet authorities registered incidents during the Afghan occupation in which Muslim soldiers rebelled against fighting their co-religionists.<sup>1</sup> While far from universal, these telling episodes do suggest a certain disharmony in the ranks and a growing failure in the ability for the army to produce a supranational Soviet identity—hardly the stuff of martial cohesion. Secondly, Eichler's focus on the military as the site of masculine socialization neglects recent historical work that questions the existence of a hegemonic Soviet masculinity in the post-Stalin period.<sup>2</sup>

These minor qualms aside, Eichler's study provides a valuable and insightful analysis of the ways in which state-level actors, military personnel, and civilians have each contributed to the construction and reproduction of gendered notions of military service and Russian patriotism. Her lucid, jargon-free prose makes this a suitable work for use in both the undergraduate classroom and for researchers in the social sciences.

*Michigan State University*

BRANDON GRAY MILLER

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<sup>1</sup> Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 47–49 and Taras Kuzio, 'Opposition in the USSR to the Occupation of Afghanistan', *Central Asian Survey*, 6.1 (1987), 99–117.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Erica L. Fraser, 'Masculinities in the Motherland: Gender and Authority in the Soviet Union during the Cold War, 1945–1968' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009) and Marko Dumancic, 'Rescripting Stalinist Masculinity: Contesting the Male Ideal in Soviet Film and Society, 1953–1968' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010).