

## The Phenomenon of the Liberated Soldier's Wife

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The First World War caused unbelievable suffering for millions of people. In Russia the numbers of sick, wounded, and maimed soldiers, refugees, widows, and orphans were unprecedented. The largest category of war victims was soldiers' families, aid to whom required the largest expenditures. In the absence of their breadwinning husbands, soldiers' wives had to manage the household and provide sustenance for themselves and their children. Disenfranchised, oppressed, and largely illiterate, soldiers' wives were transformed by the war into emancipated, demanding, and independent women who possessed common goals and elements of organization in their actions, and who played an important role in the revolutionary events of 1917. Let us attempt to determine how this transformation proceeded and why it occurred.

Soldiers' families won the attention of the state, society, and philanthropists from the early days of the war. In 1914, for the first time in Russian history, the principle of mandatory, so-called state assistance (*gosudarstvennoe prizrenie*) was extended on a mass scale to the families of certain categories of rank-and-file soldiers (*nizhnie chiny*): mobilized reservists, soldiers kept on active duty after their compulsory service ended, and men enrolled in the militia. In accordance with a law issued before the war, on 25 June 1912, wives and children of soldiers received the right to assistance in the form of state subsistence allowances (*paiki*), which were given as monthly monetary payments per person calculated according to the prices of basic foodstuffs. Children up to five years of age were given half-allowances, and when they reached seventeen years, the allowances stopped. While wives and children of soldiers received allowances regardless of their material situation, the parents, grandfathers, grandmothers, brothers, and sisters of the soldiers received allowances only if they had been supported by the mobilized soldier.<sup>1</sup> Families of civilians work-

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<sup>1</sup> *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, sobranie 3, vol. 32, pt. 1, no. 37507 (St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvennaia tipografiia, 1915). Families of soldiers on active duty in performance of their compulsory military service were not eligible for state allowances under this law. The allowance (*paek*) was calculated on the basis of one *pud* 28 *funty*

ing in workshops, state-owned factories and plants, and similar enterprises who were called to active duty received regular state assistance in the form of one-half, one-third, or one-quarter of the breadwinners' wages, depending on the size and makeup of the family. In addition, full or partial salaries of civilian employees in central and local government institutions were guaranteed to their families. In these cases, however, the families of the mobilized workers lost the right to the monthly allowance.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the subsistence allowance, the central state, municipalities, local governments (*zemstva*), and various charities provided soldiers' families with considerable assistance in other forms. The Supreme Council for Aid to Soldiers' Families (Verkhovnyi soviet po prizreniiu semei lits, prizvannykh na voinu), established on 11 August 1914 and headed by Empress Aleksandra Fedorovna, was in charge of providing general assistance to the families of men called to war, as well as the families of wounded and fallen soldiers. The Elizabeth Committee (Elizavetinskii komitet) in Moscow, headed by the Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fedorovna, operated under the auspices of the Supreme Council, as did the Caucasus Committee (Kavkazskii komitet) and the Olga Committee (Ol'ginskii komitet) in Petrograd, headed by the Grand Duchess Ol'ga Nikolaevna, which extended its operations to Finland as well as Petrograd and its province. The activity of the Elizabeth Committee was particularly extensive, with local branches throughout the empire and up to 6,000 charitable organizations under its jurisdiction by the beginning of 1917. These quasi-governmental committees, named after members of the imperial family, financed their activities through private donations and state appropriations.

Additional measures were taken to provide families of soldiers with food, rent, money, goods, labor, and legal support. They were granted free or discounted travel by rail in third- or fourth-class cars, loans on favorable terms, tax benefits (deferments and consolidation of payments), and preference in the allocation of land for resettlement in Siberia as well as the rental and purchase of state-owned land. Peasant communes helped soldiers' families during planting, harvesting, threshing, and other agricultural activities. They were also provided with free seeds and loans of agricultural equipment and machines, etc. They could take fallen timber from state-owned forest tracts for fuel, and buy firewood at fixed prices. Their children were educated for free in public schools, while little ones were placed in shelters and day nurseries. Existing charitable institutions were expanded and transformed, and new ones

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of flour, 10 *funt* of cereals, 4 *funt* of salt, and 1 *funt* of vegetable oil per person per month. A *pud* contains 40 *funt*, and is equivalent to 16.38 kg, or 36 lbs.; one *funt* equals 409.5 grams.

<sup>2</sup> *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporiazhenii pravitel'stva, izdavaemoe pri Pravitel'stviushchem Senate*, no. 233 (1914), art. 2282.

established: cheap and free cafeterias, hostels, day shelters, labor offices for job opportunities, and foster care. Sewing, knitting, and shoemaking workshops and laundries were opened, and workers' cooperatives were organized. In the distribution of orders for the products of cottage industries—coats, boots, warm underwear, and so on—opportunities to earn were provided preferentially to soldiers' wives. Deductions were made from employees' salaries and donations collected everywhere in order to help the families of "defenders of the Fatherland," and charity bazaars and raffles, performances and concerts were held for their benefit. Never before had care for soldiers' families reached such magnitude.<sup>3</sup>

Responsibility for the payment of state allowances belonged to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, whose Office of Military Conscription (*Upravlenie voinskoi povinnosti*) carried out all the necessary accounting. It was no easy matter to manage assistance to millions of soldiers' families given the extremely unequal distribution of the population across the wide expanses of the Russian Empire, and its perennially inadequate roads. Minister of the Interior Nikolai A. Maklakov underlined the complexities involved in implementing the 1912 law, incomprehensible to "other European states":

Eniseisk province, for example, is 2,614,200 square kilometers in size, and exceeds the overall size of the western European powers; the Iakutsk region is six times the size of Germany and thirty-two times the size of Serbia; Eniseisk is more than five times the size of Austria-Hungary, Germany, Spain, Italy, and France taken together; Tomsk is larger than each of those countries; Arkhangel'sk province is larger than France and Italy together, and twenty-eight times larger than the territory of Belgium. The great expanse of individual provinces so complicates the implementation of food assistance that it completely exceeds the abilities of local administration and inevitably entails delays and omissions in certain cases, the great infrequency of which serves only to confirm how successfully the distribution of aid is going.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See L. A. Bulgakova, "Privilegirovannye bedniaki: Pomoshch' soldatskim sem'iam v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny," in *Na puti k revoliutsionnym potriasieniiam: Iz istorii Rossii vtoroi poloviny XIX–nachala XIX veka*, ed. V. S. Diakin (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Historia, 2001), 429–93; N. L. Pushkareva and P. P. Shcherbinin, "Organizatsiia prizreniia semei nizhnikh chinov v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny," *Zhurnal issledovaniia sotsial'noi politiki* 23, 2 (2005): 147–63.

<sup>4</sup> *Izvestiia Verkhovnogo Soveta po prizreniiu semei lits, prizoannykh na voinu, a takzhe semei ranenykh i pavshikh voinov*, vyp. 6 (1915): 51.

In reality, a multitude of complaints about “omissions” came in. Implementing the new system of security for soldiers’ families demanded effort and time. Chaos and confusion reigned in the realm of assistance to soldiers’ families as the legislation was being interpreted during conditions of war, lists of allowance recipients were being compiled, surveys of funds were being conducted, and accounts drawn up.

In some places soldiers’ wives rioted. According to an eyewitness of events in Odessa on 11 August 1914, the wives of mobilized reservists there “assembled together in a large crowd, probably under the influence of some agitator, and headed toward the city council building.” In the melee that followed a policeman was wounded, and the women “created an uproar” at the Hotel Europe and Robin’s Pastry Shop.

Then groups of Odessa “suffragists,” each about ten persons, went into shops and asked for money. Strictly speaking, an amazing sight; never before has there been as much concern for the families of reservists as in this war. The city council, with all its energy, does not have the possibility of satisfying everyone at once—the completion of some formalities, as well as time, are needed, and then all will be satisfied. Here, evidently, is the influence of those who spread false rumors that entire military units have perished.... Everything was so good, so friendly, up to now, and suddenly this sharp dissonance. Such actions will cost them sympathy, stupid women.<sup>5</sup>

All the same, at the beginning of the war soldiers’ wives preferred not to riot, but rather appealed to authorities with complaints and “tearful petitions,” which were composed at their request by literate people such as the writer S. L. Obleukhova (whose pseudonym was “S. Kuchinskaia”). Writing on 11 August 1914 from St. Petersburg (to be renamed Petrograd one week later for patriotic reasons), Obleukhova described her experience with soldiers’ wives to the deputy to the State Duma V. M. Purishkevich, a fellow member of the “Russian Popular Union of the Archangel Michael” who was working in the local branch of the Red Cross in Warsaw:

[M]any offices treat [reservists’ families] with distressing rudeness and do not give out money. Simply unbelievable scenes take place. Four

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<sup>5</sup> Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) f. 102 (Department of Police of the Ministry of Internal Affairs), op. 265, d. 993, l. 1242. Excerpt from letter signed “your Kolia” from Odessa to N. A. Sheller in Kremenchug, Poltava province. I am grateful to my colleague Boris Kolonitskii for information about the materials in this collection.

hundred to six hundred women come each day for aid, nothing is explained to them, and they are chased away. In another place a guard threw 150 tickets for the right to receive a few rubles into a crowd of six hundred women. Scuffles break out, gendarmes on horseback force their way into the crowd and "press back" the women. Today ... one child was crushed to death. I did not believe all of this, but women with children come to me, weep, and swear to me that it is the truth.<sup>6</sup>

A great admirer of the "charitable exploits" of Father Ioann of Kronshtadt and no stranger herself to charity work, Obleukhova blamed unscrupulous aid workers (*popечители*) for everything, but in such a situation even the most well meaning would have given up in the face of the crowds of soldiers' wives. Obleukhova herself was not able to manage the petitioners who "are besieging my kitchen. I helped one, then another, and they send tens of others, all with complaints and tears. What can I do? I don't have money for them. I make inquiries, I write threatening letters to building owners and doormen who evict the women. So far the threats work, but I am occupied solely with compiling complaints and inquiries."<sup>7</sup>

It was clear that emergency measures were needed to normalize the situation. Life itself suggested a way out: a path should be made for the public (*obshchestvennost'*), without which efforts by the bureaucracy, local authorities, and individual philanthropists to organize systematic assistance to soldiers' wives was practically impossible. A broad field of activity opened up before the Russian public. (For an appeal to aid soldiers' families, in the gallery of images following page << >>.) Locally, aid to soldiers' families was distributed largely through township (*volostnye*) and municipal guardianships (*popечительства*), while in those few towns, including the capitals, where district guardianships for the poor already existed, they were charged with these functions. A multibranch system of guardianships quickly began to form. All formal obstacles to joining guardianships were removed immediately, and volunteers from both sexes and all classes and economic conditions poured into them. Among them were many women, people from the liberal professions (lawyers, doctors, engineers, professors, etc.), and students. Sergei K. Gogel', chairman of the executive board of the All-Russian Union of Welfare and Charity Organizations and Activists (Vserossiiskii Souiz uchrezhdenii, obshchestv i deiatelei po obshchestvennomu prizreniiu i blagotvoritel'nosti), urged the general assembly of Union members on 8 March 1915 to remind the public and the government that the revitalization of the guardianships' activ-

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I. 1225.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

ity and the influx of new volunteers into them occurred only because, "with the tacit approval of the administration, formal requirements [of membership] were not observed, and all who joined the guardianships received an opportunity to act autonomously and to influence their direction."<sup>8</sup> Guardianships came to represent *de facto* grassroots cells of local government. After advocating for decades for the introduction of a township-level (*volostnoe*) zemstvo, the Russian public regarded the establishment of guardianships on this level, elected by a township assembly, as the first step toward the creation of all-estate township-level institutions of local government. Gogel' without apology asserted that all-estate township-level guardianships "as it were temporarily substituted for a township-level zemstvo."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, municipal guardianships were considered to be the embryo of local government units at the level of the municipal district (municipal district councils). Soldiers' wives did not participate themselves in the work of the guardianships, and as recipients of charity remained passive, if one does not count protests and complaints about abuses and irregularities in the distribution of allowances. (See figure 13 for a photo of soldiers' wives waiting at the office of one of the Petrograd guardianships in 1916.)

If the hope began to dawn in the intelligentsia of liberation from bureaucratic fetters and the restructuring of public life, the war promised nothing but grief for the populace. A story told by S. A. Sokol'skaia, a student and medic at the time, is typical. Spending her vacation in her native village of Karabanovo (Vladimir province), she recalled how fellow villagers greeted news of the war "with frenzied wailing, shrieking, and weeping," and crowds of people started walking toward the church; "some are hurrying, others trudge along, bathed in tears."<sup>10</sup> Even before the war began, on 16 July 1914, Minister of the Interior Maklakov admitted that "war cannot be popular in our country, in the interior, and to the people the idea of revolution is more understandable than victory over the Germans. But you do not walk away from fate."<sup>11</sup> Maklakov's premonition was confirmed. V. A. Posse, editor and publisher of the magazine *Zhizn' dlia vsekh* (Life for Everyone), recollected that

<sup>8</sup> *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 3–4 (1915): 172.

<sup>9</sup> S. K. Gogel', "Kak zemstvu i gorodu pomogat' zhertvam voiny?" *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 3–4 (1915): 175.

<sup>10</sup> Voенно-медицинский музей Министерства обороны Российской Федерации, Основной фонд, д. 76938.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in S. Dobrovol'skii, *O mobilizatsii russkoi armii v 1914 godu* (Moscow, 1929), 106.

only gentlemen [*gospoda*] burned with patriotism. Among the lower classes there was an indistinct ferment. In the villages of such dangerous provinces as Saratov, reservists were rounded up at night and quickly “whisked” away to who knows where, without the opportunity of saying goodbye to their families. This, at least, was what “simple folk” told us in Saratov.... In answer to our question about how the village responded to mobilization, we often heard: “with moaning.”<sup>12</sup>

The people understood that it was necessary to defend the country, but the reasons for war were incomprehensible. Soldiers and their wives had a murky idea even of their native land, let alone of other countries and international relations. In Posse’s words, “an unimaginable confusion reigned in the heads of ‘simple folk’ at the start of the war.”<sup>13</sup> They did not expect war and reacted to it as to an enormous grief. Moscow pediatrician A. I. Dobrokhotova informed her fiancé F. O. Krauze on 1 August 1914: “Today my sister arrived here [from the village of Vichuga in Kostroma province—*L.B.*] to begin nursing courses; she says that in the village they are convinced that the Second Coming has arrived (you see, all the words of the Apocalypse are coming true), they just cannot decide who is the Antichrist—Wilhelm or Nicholas II.”<sup>14</sup>

While rejection of the war became only stronger with time, the lack of understanding of its reasons remained. A year after the beginning of the war peasants were saying that Germany “in large part went to war because of overcrowding. So their tsar wishes to kill half of his people.”<sup>15</sup> General A. A. Brusilov also encountered incomprehension of the reasons for war. “How many times did I ask in the trenches, What are we fighting for, and I inevitably received the answer that some ertz-gertz-pertz [*sic*] over there was killed with his wife by someone, and that’s why the Austrians wanted to hurt the Serbs.... It turned out that people were led to slaughter without knowing why, that is, at the tsar’s whim.”<sup>16</sup> According to V. I. Gurko, a member of the State Council, the war “evoked a silent, vague, submissive but real dissatisfaction. To a significant degree the distribution of aid to families of mobilized reserv-

<sup>12</sup> V. A. Posse, *Moi zhiznennyi put’: Dorevoliutsionnyi period (1864–1917 gg.)* (Moscow–Leningrad: Zemlia i fabrika, 1929), 479.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Krauze family private archive.

<sup>15</sup> GARF f. 102, op. 265, d. 1026, l. 442 (excerpt from a letter of 25 July 1915 from Moscow to F. I. Rodichev in Petrograd, signature illegible).

<sup>16</sup> A. A. Brusilov, *Moi vospominaniia* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), 69.

ists, beginning approximately a month after [the start of the war], reconciled [people] to it."<sup>17</sup>

The implementation of the 1912 law on state allowances raised many vexed questions, even among governors, who repeatedly asked the Ministry of the Interior to explain the law and about directives and instructions.<sup>18</sup> A survey conducted by the Central Information Bureau of Petrograd Municipal Guardianships in November–early December 1914 found that guardianships “almost unanimously all noted countless complaints about extremely difficult and inequitable distribution of allowances in the provinces,” which they mainly attributed to incorrect interpretations of the law rather than ill intent.<sup>19</sup> Soldiers’ wives thought otherwise; they distrusted village guardianships, which operated virtually without oversight, even more than municipal ones. “Many women harbor the firm conviction that in the village ‘you won’t get,’ ‘they don’t give,’ ‘they bite off [some of the money],’” wrote V. S. Krivenko, chairman of the Petrograd City Charity Commission.<sup>20</sup> Peasants disappointed the hopes of liberals: occupied with agricultural work, they had no time to engage in elections and regarded the right given them to elect guardianship members as an empty formality. As a result the task of caring for soldiers’ families ended up in the hands of village elders, township heads (*volostnye starshiny*), scribes, etc. Other times soldiers’ wives did not miss a chance to take advantage of the absence of contact between charitable organizations and to receive assistance from various places. Rumors about the significant funds released for aid to soldiers’ families quickly spread among the population. “And so, intoxicated by rumors, reservists’ wives go from one organization to another, receiving assistance from everywhere and in some cases raising their income to a level unprecedented when the husband was around,” a speaker claimed at the general meeting of one Petrograd guardianship on 10 February 1915.<sup>21</sup> Such “abuses” by soldiers’ wives were possible in places where a more or less developed structure of charitable organizations existed.

With rare exceptions soldiers’ families in both village and town struggled in the clutches of poverty before the war, and so the state allowance was a

<sup>17</sup> V. I. Gurko, *Cherty i siluety proshlogo: Pravitel'stvo i obshchestvennost' v tsarstvovanie Nikolaia II v izobrazhenii sovremennika* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000), 644.

<sup>18</sup> Bulgakova, “Privilegirovannye bedniaki,” 448–50.

<sup>19</sup> “Anketa po vydache kazennogo posobiia Petrogradskimi gorodskimi popechitel'stvami o bednykh,” *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 3–4 (1915): 24.

<sup>20</sup> V. S. Krivenko, “Sem'i zapasnykh,” *Novoe vremia*, 20 September 1914.

<sup>21</sup> “O deiatel'nosti patronata pri 11 gorodskom popechitel'stve o bednykh,” *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 1–2 (1915): 62.



godsend to them. Krivenko, who as the chairman of the Petrograd Charity Commission had continual contact with families of mobilized reservists, found their material condition little different from "the hopelessly poor who are served in peacetime by the guardianships." Many soldiers' wives lived in filthy quarters and hardly made ends meet. The overwhelming majority of them were illiterate and could not even sign the distribution registers. It is no wonder that soldiers' wives treated state allowances "with a certain reverence."<sup>22</sup> Sometimes the allowance payments to soldiers' families exceeded the earnings of their breadwinners called up for military service. "In such families the women usually felt little grief over the departure of their husbands for war," State Councilor Gurko commented.<sup>23</sup> The monthly allowance of several rubles or tens of rubles for a family was a kind of minimum living standard guaranteed by the government, but many families before the war did not have even that. There is a mass of evidence of the significance of the allowance for soldiers' families. For example, one private letter from early September 1914 stated: "As for the care shown to soldiers and their families, in this respect there is even great luxury. Funds for the allowance payments have already arrived at township administrative offices, and there are families, they say, who are due to receive 80 rubles by December."<sup>24</sup> The writer of another letter commented in July 1915 that "[s]oldiers' wives live no worse than before the war in the economic sense. At least their menfolk do not feel very sorry for them. For example, we had a worker making 60 rubles a year; now his wife receives 40 rubles in three months."<sup>25</sup>

As the number of war victims needing social assistance swiftly grew, fresh resources were required. At the end of 1914 and the beginning of 1915, however, public enthusiasm noticeably declined. Demand for free volunteer labor in the guardianships exceeded the supply by many times, and volunteers began to leave, tired of working out of "pure enthusiasm" or finding somewhere else to apply their energies. For example, in 1914 the number of volunteer workers in Petrograd municipal guardianships increased three to four and even five to six times; but the following year their number decreased

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<sup>22</sup> Krivenko, "Sem'i zapasnykh."

<sup>23</sup> Gurko, *Cherty i siluety proshlogo*, 644–45.

<sup>24</sup> GARF f. 102, op. 265, d. 995, l. 1422 (excerpt from letter of Neratov [no first name or initials] from 8 September 1914 to A. A. Neratov in Petrograd).

<sup>25</sup> GARF f. 102, op. 265, d. 1026, l. 442 (excerpt from letter of 25 July 1915, signature illegible).

by half, although the guardianships managed to retain their stability.<sup>26</sup> One commentator lamented: “[W]e need broad democratic organizations, we need the activism of the masses themselves, on the basis of self-help. Deep strata of the urban working population, however, have as yet displayed hardly any initiative and energy in this direction.”<sup>27</sup> The creation of broad democratic organizations was even less to be expected from the rural population.

The initial surge of public activism to come to the aid of soldiers’ families was replaced by a certain irritation caused by the behavior of soldiers’ wives and by criticism of the equalizing approach taken to distributing aid. Comments appeared in the press about the “corrupting influence” of charitable assistance, which could cause soldiers’ wives to grow accustomed to “dependence,” and of allowance payments given out without consideration to recipients’ ability to work or material situation. As early as the fall of 1914 A. P. Vvedenskii, professor at Petrograd University and chairman of the 17th Petrograd municipal guardianship, expressed concern to the general meeting of the Union of Welfare and Charity Organizations and Activists over whether some families should not receive assistance, “so that they are not schooled in living off of charity. However,” he added, “this misallocated assistance is not so terrible, if one remembers that it will continue only to the war’s end, and that it now goes not to vodka but to improving the well-being of those families who are still more or less poor, and who feel [they possess] an inarguable right to special attention from society.”<sup>28</sup> At the general meeting of Union members in March 1915 the chairman of another Petrograd guardianship, A. E. Znosko-Borovskii, worried that by giving reservists’ families “excessive” aid, guardianships were discouraging families from working and “preparing them for a sad future after the war ends.” He also expressed concern over the failure to make distinctions between deserving and undeserving recipients, in violation of the principles of rational public assistance.<sup>29</sup> But the colossal number of those needing aid, and the lack of necessary legal guidelines, personnel, and financial resources, made the task of conducting investigations and establishing supervision (*patronat*) over recipients unrealizable, and also

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<sup>26</sup> L. Ia. Gurevich, *Obzor deiatel'nosti gorodskikh popechitel'stv o bednykh za pervyi god voiny 1914–1915* (Petrograd: Sovet po prizreniiu semei lits, prizvannykh na voinu, 1915), 76.

<sup>27</sup> K. Oranskii, “Shtrikhi obshchestvennosti (Pis'mo iz Petrograda),” *Kievskaiia mysl'*, 18 November 1914.

<sup>28</sup> “17 popechitel'stvo,” *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 8–10 (1915): cols. 1037–38.

<sup>29</sup> *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 3–4 (1915): 171.

made no practical sense, given the obvious material insecurity of the absolute majority of soldiers' families.

Other activists were concerned with giving soldiers' wives first and foremost the opportunity to earn their own living. S. V. Bakhrushin, who belonged to a family of renowned Moscow philanthropists, warned the annual meeting of the City Charity Council on 24 February 1915: "It is necessary to organize assistance on the largest possible scale, but at the same time it is necessary in every way possible to avoid all those forms of aid that could lead to the creation of a class of people living exclusively on charity." This famous philanthropist proposed "rejecting the principle of benevolence [*blagotvorenie*] in the narrow sense of the word" and advocated preventive measures, such as the provision of employment.<sup>30</sup> K. I. Anufriev, secretary of the Special Petrograd Office for the Investigation and Relief of Beggars, worried that the law of 25 June 1912 "immediately created a kind of privileged class of people who enjoyed government-funded support independent of the level of their need, which violated one of the basic principles of welfare."<sup>31</sup> Anufriev bemoaned the fact that other categories of the poor "were somehow eclipsed, reduced to nothing," while first place went to families of reservists, "on whom great and abundant favors are showered" and "colossal amounts are spent.... [M]any reservists' families have begun to receive incomparably more than was earned by their breadwinners now called up to war, [and] have begun to live as never before."<sup>32</sup> Recognizing the right of soldiers' families to social assistance, Anufriev insisted on the necessity of helping them in the same way as any poor person. "We have not understood this and in striving to help have created in wartime a kind of privileged class of public welfare pensioners out of reservists' families."<sup>33</sup> In a country where indigence was an everyday and ubiquitous phenomenon, the right to obligatory assistance for one of the categories of the needy was regarded by society as a privilege.

The introduction into Russia of so-called prohibition (*sukhoi zakon*)—the ban on the sale of alcohol—had a large influence on the lives of the population. It took some time for people to adapt to prohibition and learn to evade it, and in the first months of the war the press was in an optimistic mood. The press unanimously noted that "forced sobriety" facilitated the improvement of popular well-being, raised labor productivity, benefited health, and trans-

<sup>30</sup> "Deiatel'nost' moskovskikh gorodskikh popechitel'stv o bednykh v sviazi s voinoi," *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 3–4 (1915): 203.

<sup>31</sup> K. I. Anufriev, "Blizhaishie zadachi gosudarstva v oblasti prizreniia v sviazi s voinoi," *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 6–7 (1915): 389.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 389–90.

formed the popular standard of living. The pages of the press in the capital and provinces painted a wondrous picture of the people's recovery from an evil "illness": by imperial decree, as if by magic, "Mother Russia sobered up."<sup>34</sup> Overall deposits into savings banks increased in 1914 in comparison with the previous year by 6.5 times, from 13 million to 84 million rubles. The increase was especially sharp once the war began; the influx of deposits in December 1914 exceeded December 1913 by 41 times, and for the first week of 1915 deposits increased 51 times compared to the same period in 1914. The sudden improvement in popular well-being was explained first and foremost by "liberation from the tribute paid to the tavern" and state allowance payments.<sup>35</sup> Sobriety brought with it a decrease in crime, hooliganism, fires, and the rate of illness at the beginning of the war. "The peasants' household economy has already begun to improve noticeably; even among the 'down-and-outs,' families are fed, shod, clothed," a contemporary noted.<sup>36</sup> The purchasing power of the population grew significantly, trade in textiles was brisk, people flocked to cultural pursuits, felt themselves to be participants in events taking place in the country and beyond its borders. One journalist confirmed in astonishment: "a burning desire to know what is going on in the world has appeared in the villages."<sup>37</sup>

Soldiers' wives attained economic and financial autonomy during the war, and could be in charge of their money. Some broke away from large peasant families, not wishing to put their money into the "common pot" and reconcile themselves to the tutelage of "elders." Once vegetating in poverty and deprived of rights, soldiers' wives now dressed themselves up and equipped themselves with umbrellas, galoshes, eau de cologne, and other "luxury items." Changes in soldiers' wives' outward appearance were immediately noticed by contemporaries, who began to reproach them for their extravagance and wastefulness. The expenditures of female dandies on "ribbons, lace, and shoes" could not be compared, however, to the former expenditures of their husbands on drink. Not only breadwinners went to war, but also drunkards.

<sup>34</sup> For example: I. V. Zhilkin, "Provintsial'noe obozrenie," *Vestnik Evropy*, no. 9 (1914): 338–42; V. M. Bekhterev, "Otrezvlennie naroda i npravstvennoe ozdorovlenie," *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 12 December 1914; N. P. Oganovskii, "Otrezvlennaia Rossiia," *Severnye zapiski*, no. 12 (1914): 10–11, 21–24; A.Ch., "Pis'ma chitatelei: Voina i krest'ianin," *Kurskaia byl'*, 1 December 1914.

<sup>35</sup> V. D. Kuz'min-Karavaev, "Feericheskie tsifry," *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 10 January 1915.

<sup>36</sup> K. Ponomarev, "Perevorot v narodnom bytu," *Den'*, 27 November 1914.

<sup>37</sup> A. Ufimskii, "Gazet! Gazet!" *Zashchita*, 13 September 1914.

As later events showed, the ecstasies over the mass sobering up and the “cleansing of filth” were premature. Prohibition created a niche for denatured spirits and homebrew.<sup>38</sup> Enterprising soldiers’ wives hastened to extract advantage from prohibition. In February 1916 a correspondent from the Urals wrote Senator N. S. Grabar’:

Sobriety, having brought so much good, lasted about a year, but lo, the green serpent, seemingly breathing its last breath, has stirred to life again and reappeared. Almost every soldier’s wife traded almost openly in homebrewed beer and moonshine, no less capable of making one drunk than the former 80-proof stuff. The large flow of money into the village and the absence of cultured recreation create favorable conditions for the rebirth of our historical vice. And the evil expands and grows without any restraint. You do not hear about any measures against underground distillers anywhere. People say openly that the latter have opened up a new source of income for the police. Were the defenders of letting the people drink [*spaivanie naroda*] really right when they said that it is better to let the government obtain reliable revenue from the people’s vice?<sup>39</sup>

Other new opportunities for earnings appeared, resulting from increased work at manufacturing enterprises due to military orders and the army’s orders for food and fodder “at good prices,” which had great significance for the population’s material condition, especially for soldiers’ families. Press reports noted the successes of various kinds of cooperatives, and the high rate of activity among women, especially soldiers’ wives, who joined consumer cooperatives. Thus the proportion of women in Moscow cooperatives rose several times, and in some they constituted half of the members.<sup>40</sup> In Petrograd guardianships helped organize laundries and sewing, knitting, and shoe-making workshops. Workshops there produced five million items in the first

<sup>38</sup> See Artur Mak-ki [Arthur McKee], “Sukhoi zakon v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny: Prichiny, kontsepsiia i posledstviia vvedeniia sukhogo zakona v Rossii, 1914–1917,” in *Rossii i Pervaia mirovaia voina (Materialy mezhdunarodnogo nauchnogo kollokviuma)*, ed. N. N. Smirnov (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1999), 147–59.

<sup>39</sup> GARF f. 102, op. 265, d. 1051, ll. 362–362ob. (excerpt from a letter from A. V. Ognev, 10 February 1916, from Sosnoozerskaia Agricultural Colony, Perm’ province, to N. S. Grabar’ in Petrograd).

<sup>40</sup> K. E. Baldin, “Povsednevaia zhizn’ rossiiskikh rabochikh-kooperatorov v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny,” in *Malen’kii chelovek i bol’shaia voina v istorii Rossii: Seredina XIX–seredina XX veka. Materialy mezhdunarodnogo kollokviuma (Sankt-Peterburg, 17–20 iunია 2013 g.)*, ed. T. A. Abrosimova (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2014), 181.

year of the war, and the aggregate earnings of female workers reached 360,000 rubles. The well-known philanthropist Countess S. V. Panina and A. S. Miliukova, wife of the Kadet party leader, actively participated in organizing workshops. Soldiers' wives eagerly learned a trade, and workshops quickly spread. Approximately 20,000 women worked in them in Petrograd by the beginning of 1916, and more than 15,000 were sent to other workplaces in 1915.<sup>41</sup>

Women replaced men who had gone to war in various spheres of labor. Soldiers' wives became fighters on the labor front—as farmers, artisans, factory workers, etc. Soldiers' wives dealt alone with difficult agricultural work; they plowed, sowed, mowed, reaped, and threshed. Many left for cities in search of work. The capitals, where it was easier to find work and charitable aid was better, were particularly attractive. By the beginning of 1916 around 25,000 members of soldiers' families were counted, or more than 11 percent of all allowance recipients in Petrograd *had come from outside the city*.<sup>42</sup> The majority of them were soldiers' wives, because they usually arrived in Petrograd without their children. Here young women quickly found work in factories and mills, in commercial and manufacturing enterprises and workshops, or went into domestic service. The traditional spectrum of their occupations in towns expanded, which had included work as laundresses, cooks, day laborers, ancillary workers, unskilled laborers, or in the best case, as seamstresses. But this victory had its negative side. The sight of a woman straining herself loading and unloading goods or doing repair work on railroads became a common one. The hard physical labor of a stevedore, stoker, or smith, not characteristic of the weaker sex, could not help but harm female health. The same was true of labor by children and adolescents, which expanded significantly. There the question of protecting women's and children's health arose with particular urgency, but resolving it was postponed until peacetime.

Thus at the beginning of the war the overall material condition of soldiers' wives noticeably improved. The sharp contraction in grain exports, which almost ceased in 1916, and the introduction of "prohibition" also helped. While their husbands fought, thousands of peasant women became city dwellers and adapted to urban culture. Soldiers' wives raised their heads, felt their strength, and acquired the habit of economic independence. The war forced them to perceive the real need for literacy. Knowing how to read, write, and count helped them find suitable work, run the household, insist on their rights,

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<sup>41</sup> "Obshchestvennaia rabota v gorodskikh popechitel'stvakh: Letopis' Petrogradskikh i prigorodnykh popechitel'stv," *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 1–2 (1916): col. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA) f. 1291 (Military Service Administration of the Ministry of the Interior), op. 7, d. 350 ("O prekrashchenii vydachi paika sem'iam nizhnikh voinskikh chinov, pribyvshim v gor. Petrograd"), ll. 58–59.

correspond with their husbands without intermediaries, and venture out beyond the confines of their little domestic worlds. P. P. Shcherbinin, author of the only monograph, along with a series of articles, to pay serious attention to the condition and everyday life of soldiers' wives at various stages in Russian history, has emphasized that World War I destroyed barriers that in peacetime had always obstructed women's self-realization in the public and labor spheres, the elimination of inequality, and the attainment of equal rights.<sup>43</sup>

The new type of willful and defiant soldier's wife who challenges the patriarchal order of village life found its literary embodiment in the story by Lidiia Seifullina, "Virinea" (1924), written "hot on the heels" of events, which became a classic of Russian literature. As the soldier's wife Anisia, one of the story's heroines, says: "Womenfolk have made themselves free these days!" The war undermined not only the foundations of government but also the moral foundations of family and society. It was in those years that the sources of social revolution and the "sexual revolution" that followed it were clearly revealed. As the soldier's wife, receiving a legal right to the state's and society's support, rose in status, the relationship toward her also changed in the family. Now the breadwinner and benefactress, the soldier's wife became the central figure in the family and mistress in her own right. With husbands gone to the front the problem of family despotism resolved itself naturally. Old-fashioned (*domostroevskie*) customs and the subordinate position of women in the family came to an end. The emancipation process for women picked up speed and became irreversible. As one society lady wrote to Minister of Finance P. L. Bark in January 1916 from her Ukrainian estate: "It will be interesting to observe how men will conduct themselves after returning from the war, when they will run into a huge group of 'suffragists' who have seized all domestic affairs into their hands, who know how to work, have their own money, and are strong after two years of autonomy."<sup>44</sup>

As the war dragged on, it brought income to some but subjected others to poverty. Thanks to abundant harvests in 1914–15 peasants accumulated some grain reserves, but gradually mobilization exhausted the village's resources. While the standard of living rose for part of the urban and rural population, households left without workers fell into ruin, and the population in areas of military operations became impoverished, deprived of shelter and food. Although soldiers' families, in contrast to so many others, were guaranteed subsistence aid, at times they could not help but experience hardship as sup-

<sup>43</sup> P. P. Shcherbinin, *Voennyi faktor v povsednevnoi zhizni russkoi zhenshchiny v XVIII–nachale XX v.* (Tambov: Iulis, 2004), 269.

<sup>44</sup> GARF f. 102, op. 265, d. 1050, l. 229 (excerpt from a letter by Princess E. K. Kantakuzina [Cantacuzène], Countess Speranskaia, dated 29 January 1916 from Velikaia Buromka, Poltava province, to P. L. Bark in Petrograd; translation from the French).

ply problems worsened. On 31 May 1915 Dobrokhotova wrote her fiancé at the front from the village of Marfino in Kostroma province: "The most desired word is 'peace.' All the soldiers' letters end with the words: 'Have you heard anything about peace?' Ferment is beginning here too. It is caused by the huge shortage of supplies. The stores are expected to be looted."<sup>45</sup> "Ignorant womenfolk" may have understood little about military operations, but they knew all about prices for food and manufactured goods.

Fears expressed earlier in the press about the emergence of a "dependent mood" in soldiers' families were fully justified. Not all soldiers' wives rushed to work by the sweat of their brow from day to day. A certain gentleman from Bendery in Bessarabia province, signing his letter "A Local Landowner," informed Minister of Agriculture A. N. Naumov in alarm:

Very little winter grain has been sown in Kherson and Bessarabia provinces, and none of the landowners and renters is planning to sow spring crops because there are no workers. Of course the main reason is that many have gone into the army, and the able-bodied women, adolescents, and old men left here do not want to work because they receive state allowances. Before the war they all worked for themselves and neighboring landowners, but now they do not intend to sow for themselves any more than is required to feed their own families. So next autumn Bessarabia will not provide the army with millions of pounds of grain and vegetables.<sup>46</sup>

The "local landowner" proposed sending able-bodied refugees to Bessarabia without giving them allowances, and recruiting military units deployed in the area to do the work. Other measures he proposed concerned soldiers' wives directly: "Of course, it is necessary to force the local population receiving allowances to work also. It is already impossible to take away their allowances, but one can reduce them by depriving able-bodied family members of the right to an allowance. Then prohibit free postage for letters to the army, abolish free and reduced fares on railroads, and impose some kind of tax on calico."<sup>47</sup> But there was no way back. Any one of these measures would have caused a storm of indignation among soldiers' wives.

If the situation of soldiers' families generally seemed relatively stable, protected, and even well provided for at the beginning of the war, with time it began to worsen. Public attention switched to other war victims—sick,

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<sup>45</sup> From the Krauze family private archive.

<sup>46</sup> GARF f. 102, op. 265, d. 1050, l. 224.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



wounded, and disabled soldiers, refugees, homeless children. But the main reason for the impoverishment of soldiers' families was the economic crisis developing in Russia from mid-1916. Despite the significant reduction in sown area due to the labor shortage, there was bread in the country, but far-sighted *kulaks* and landowners behaved like "speculators," holding back grain surpluses and refusing to sell grain at the announced fixed prices. Many soldiers' families ended up in poverty due to poorly organized supply systems, difficulties in shipping goods by rail, the disruption of normal trade in commodities, growth in prices for essentials and goods, more frequent requisitions of livestock and horses, the contraction of charitable aid, and finally, the introduction of forced grain requisitions. In December 1916, for example, Petrograd received only 50 percent of its required norm of flour and 25 percent of needed cooking oil.<sup>48</sup>

As rising inflation rates outstripped state allowances, soldiers' wives demanded increases and the inclusion of other foodstuffs in the allowance—potatoes, sugar, tea, and milk for children. The State Duma supported demands to widen the circle of allowance recipients to include all relatives, including those by marriage, who had been supported by the labor of men who were mobilized. The wives of soldiers who had not been mobilized but were fulfilling their regular compulsory military service demanded to be given the right to the state allowances, from which the 1912 law excluded them. Providing for soldiers' civil (*grazhdanskii*) families, not bound by church marriage, became an especially acute question. According to some figures they constituted approximately 10 percent of soldiers' families, a complete surprise to the government and society. Apparently the main reason why civil marriage was so widespread could be found in the great difficulty of divorcing and creating a new family. The processes of urbanization and increased population migration due to railroad construction and the development of industry, trade, and migratory labor exacerbated the situation that facilitated "freedom of morals." The declining authority of religion and the church probably also played a role. There were other reasons as well for the prevalence of "illegal cohabitation," especially the expenses of weddings, which according to custom had to be celebrated on a scale too lavish for the poor. Aid to soldiers' civil families and especially to their illegitimate children existed only on the unstable basis of charity. Inequality forced "unmarried" soldiers' wives to launch a bitter struggle for the recognition of civil marriages.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Ia. P. Krastyn', *Revoliutsionnaia bor'ba krest'ian v Rossii v gody imperialisticheskoi voiny (1914–1916)* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi agrarnyi institut, 1932), 82.

<sup>49</sup> See L. A. Bulgakova, "Nevenchannye soldatki: Bor'ba za priznanie grazhdanskogo braka v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny," in *Vlast', obshchestvo i reformy v Rossii v XIX–*

Rising inflation, frequent delays in the distribution of allowances, and interruptions in the food supply exacerbated dissatisfaction among soldiers' wives and gave rise to spontaneous actions expressing economic demands to the government. In her analysis of food riots during the war Barbara Engel correctly notes the unprecedented activity of soldiers' wives and their readiness to resort to violence.<sup>50</sup> Unrest and pogroms against shops, stores, and markets with the participation of soldiers' wives, and often at their instigation, took place in towns and villages in many provinces.<sup>51</sup> In Semipalatinsk, for example, from 2 p.m. on 19 November to 11 p.m. on 20 November 1915 soldiers' wives looted stores, destroying 80 percent of local trade. A local resident claimed that "the pogrom was carried out with the complete connivance of the authorities and the undisguised cooperation of troops. Soldiers first announced to the rioters that they would not shoot or undertake anything, and then they themselves took active part in the looting." Rioters who were arrested were defiant, saying that "this pogrom was only the bud, and the full flower lies ahead.... Given the mess with our food supply one must believe that the "flowers" they promise are entirely possible."<sup>52</sup>

In 1916 the overall number of actions caused by high prices grew about 13 times, reaching a total of 228, and the majority of police documents mention actions specifically by soldiers' wives and adolescents.<sup>53</sup> "Given the current heightened anxiety of the population, clashes sometimes occur with representatives of the guardianships and the city over the most insignificant slip-ups in the distribution of allowances, which are always possible; some incidents called for the intervention of police detachments," wrote B. M. Iakunchikov, chairman of the 10th Petrograd guardianship, to Prime Minister

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*nachale XX veka: Issledovaniia, istoriografiia, istochnikovedenie*, ed. T. V. Andreeva et al. (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2009), 183–214.

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Engel, "Not by Bread Alone: Subsistence Riots in Russia during World War I," *Journal of Modern History* 69, 4 (December 1997): 696–721.

<sup>51</sup> The provinces included Astrakhan', Voronezh, Kiev, Kutais, Nizhegorod, Orenburg, Saratov, Samara, Simbirsk, Stavropol, Tomsk, Khar'kov, Kherson, Kuban, Semipalatinsk, Semirechensk, Turgaisk, and the Don Cossack territory; Iu. I. Kir'ianov, "Massovye vystupleniia na pochve dorogovizny v Rossii (1914–fevral' 1917)," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 3 (1913): 8–9; also A. M. Anfimov, *Russkaia derevnia v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Sotsekgiz, 1962), 354–57; and Anfimov, ed., *Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie v Rossii v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny, iul' 1914 g.–fevral' 1917 g.: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow–Leningrad: Nauka, 1965); Shcherbinin, *Voennyi faktor*, 264–69.

<sup>52</sup> GARF f. 102, op. 265, d. 1063, l. 1328 (letter from N.S. from Semipalatinsk, dated 27 November 1915, to N. Ia. Konshin in Petrograd).

<sup>53</sup> Kir'ianov, "Massovye vystupleniia," 10, 3.

B. V. Stürmer on 8 July 1916.<sup>54</sup> Women found support in their struggle for survival and equality from fellow villagers and their husbands, who in letters from the front incited their wives to revolt: "Beat them—nothing will happen."<sup>55</sup> Soldiers and Cossacks sent to put down "women's riots" (*bab'i bunt'y*) announced that they would not shoot at "our wives."<sup>56</sup>

Soldiers' wives began to advance political as well as economic demands after the February 1917 revolution, as the economy fell into ruin, charitable organizations collapsed, and the authorities proved helpless. These included demands for a change in government, a democratic republic, a Constituent Assembly, land and freedom, women's equality, and an end to the war. One outstanding example of the transition of soldiers' wives to organized political struggle was a massive demonstration on 9 April 1917 of more than 100,000 women carrying banners along the streets of Petrograd to the Tauride Palace. The influence of the Petrograd Soviet of Soldiers' and Workers' Deputies could be perceived in the antigovernment political slogans the soldiers' wives promoted.

All the same, the basic demands of soldiers' wives remained economic. They distrusted the guardianships and suspected them of malfeasance. To those who worked for the guardianships, the logic of the dual system was clear: on the one hand, aid from the state in the form of the allowance, and on the other, supplementary aid from the municipal government, *zemstvo*, or other sources. But recipients found this difference "completely incomprehensible"; after all, "the money is disbursed by the government for mandatory assistance, and if this assistance varies in amount among the guardianships, that means sometimes they are not giving some of it to recipients."<sup>57</sup> This distrust toward the guardianships had been observed from the beginning of the war. One guardianship, reviewing the results of the first months of the war, commented: "Clients widely regard the volunteers as people who are feeding at the public trough and are consuming a good portion of it themselves.... [R]esponsibility for this lies in the deep-seated view that people who receive aid do not need to know where it comes from and how it is distributed. This gives birth to legends, and legends at such a difficult time can lead to all kinds of excesses." In order to gain recipients' trust, reformers proposed various measures: discussions with them, popular brochures explaining the functions of the

<sup>54</sup> RGIA f. 1291, op. 7, d. 350, l. 63.

<sup>55</sup> Krastyn', *Revoliutsionnaia bor'ba*, 79.

<sup>56</sup> Kir'ianov, "Massovye vystupleniia," 14.

<sup>57</sup> P.B., "K voprosu o neobkhodimykh reformakh v deiatel'nosti popechitel'stv po prizreniiu semeistv voinov: Letopis' Petrogradskikh gorodskikh i prigorodnykh popechitel'stv," *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, no. 2–3 (1917): col. 60.

guardianships and local government, and the creation of small guardianship units composed of local residents.<sup>58</sup> But guardianship volunteers remained “strangers” in the eyes of soldiers’ wives. It is likely that disclosures of disorder, waste, and embezzlement in prewar charitable organizations, which dispensed aid arbitrarily, played a role in the prejudice clients felt toward the guardianships. The alienation between them could not be overcome during the war. After the monarchy was overthrown their relationship grew worse, and discontent with the guardianships grew exponentially.

In the spirit of the times soldiers’ wives demanded their own role in the guardianships’ work. In some cases soldiers’ wives demanded that guardianships cease their activity and the entire aid effort be transferred into their hands, and that aid in kind (housing, meals, milk, bread, etc.) be converted into cash payments and, of course, that allowance payments be increased. Meetings with soldiers’ wives in Petrograd guardianships turned into stormy scenes, and it became impossible not to take their demands into consideration. “The hour of destruction for the old order has struck, and democracy in the person of reservists’ families has come before the guardianships with their ‘views’ and has begun to demand reforms in their operations,” one participant told a general meeting of guardianship representatives in Petrograd on 24 March 1917. “All these demands amount to one thing—that those receiving aid take direct part in distributing the funds allocated for their needs,” he continued. “Whatever criticism one levels at the demands of servicemen’s families,” he continued, “they contain one deep and vital truth: the prerevolutionary order with its principles of bureaucratic tutelage over each and all, and particularly the tutelage of administrative authorities over civic organizations, could not successfully establish proper relations between the guardianships and the families they cared for.” The principle of “charitable tutelage” over the families of active duty military

has turned out to be completely unacceptable under the new order. Soldiers’ wives and their children are in the eyes of society not simply people on welfare but a special class of people whom the state must aid. Therefore the whole business of helping these people and all war victims as well must be reformed on the basis of new civic principles and transferred to local self-government, [and] reorganized on a democratic foundation.

He proposed immediately bringing representatives of recipients into the governing boards or guardianships, so that they could participate in resolving

<sup>58</sup> “O deiatel’nosti patronata pri 11 gorodskom popechitel’stve o bednykh,” *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel’nost’ v Rossii*, no. 1–2 (1915): 63–64.

questions about the distribution of aid.<sup>59</sup> Both guardianships and the people under their care demanded reform of the existing system of social assistance, to accord with the general democratic transformation of the government and civic order in the new Russia.

An avalanche of appeals from soldiers' wives rained down on the Provisional Government. Complaints about withholding and improperly distributing allowances, requests for them or for increases were contained in a third of all "military" petitions.<sup>60</sup> If soldiers' wives had accepted the subsistence allowance as a blessing and favor from the tsar at the beginning of the war, now it was recognized as an inalienable right. The tone of their petitions changed fundamentally. In May 1917, for example, soldiers' wives in a village in Vladimir province demanded from A. F. Kerenskii that "in light of hunger" a law should immediately be passed giving allowances to the families of "actual soldiers," that is, active duty soldiers, not those who had been mobilized. The "citizenesses of free Russia" (as they called themselves) demanded point-blank in their petition: "We ask you Mr. General War Minister to pass a law granting allowances or else give us back our husbands and children, and let those whose families receive aid do the fighting."<sup>61</sup> Provincial officials in Eniseisk petitioned the Provisional Government in March 1917 for extending assistance to unmarried soldiers' wives and families; although the "ubiquitous discontent" in the province among these women and children had so far found expression in "vague mutterings," they feared it would soon become "a movement that threatens public tranquility."<sup>62</sup>

Beginning in March 1917 the Ministry of the Interior worked on the question of giving the right to allowances to unmarried families and other soldiers' relatives, which under the old regime had been opposed by the State Council. On 22 June the Provisional Government acceded to the demands of soldiers and their unmarried families, guardianships, civic organizations, soviets, and local authorities, and changed the rules on aid to soldiers' families to include those unmarried families who had been supported by mobilized soldiers.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> P.B., "K voprosu o neobkhodimyykh reformakh," cols. 60–62.

<sup>60</sup> S. N. Tutolmin, "Pervaia mirovaia voina v krest'ianskikh zhalobakh i prosheniakh 1914–1917 gg.," in *Chelovek i voina: Istochniki, issledovaniia, retsenzii*, ed. S. V. Iarov and V. I. Musaeu (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2003), 381–82.

<sup>61</sup> RGIA f. 1292, op. 7, d. 592 ("Po khodataistvam soldat i ikh semei o vydache prodovol'stvennogo posobiia sem'iam soldat, prizvannykh v armiiu"), ll. 38–38ob.

<sup>62</sup> RGIA f. 1929, op. 7, d. 588 ("Postanovleniia i khodataistva mestnykh gubernskikh prisutstviu i sovetov deputatov i prosheniia raznykh lits o vydache prodovol'stvennogo posobiia sem'iam soldat"), ll. 12–13.

<sup>63</sup> *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporiashchenii pravitel'stva*, no. 122 (1917), art. 1019.

An unmarried family was not eligible for the allowance if the soldier already had a married wife and family, however. Although far from all unmarried soldiers' wives could take advantage of this law, the circle of allowance recipients widened considerably.

Despite the government's readiness to make certain concessions, soldiers' wives grew increasingly dissatisfied. Even the wives of deserters and soldiers who surrendered without resistance sought the right to receive allowances. A law of 15 April 1915 had deprived the families of such soldiers of the allowance, but the soviets of soldiers', workers', and peasants' deputies came out on their side. "Under the former regime," their argument went, "soldiers lacked sufficient awareness to carry out their duty and besides, the reasons for surrender, which are generally difficult to establish when fighting is going on, have not been investigated adequately, and soldiers themselves have not taken serious part in establishing many of the facts, as a consequence of which mistakes are often made." The Ministry of War categorically disagreed.<sup>64</sup> Completely innocent children and wives of those who violated military authority went hungry, evoking sympathy from the population and unions of soldiers' wives, which began to form in the spring of 1917, and in some cases were given aid.<sup>65</sup>

The numerous petitions and complaints sent to various places, including to "Mr. Citizen Minister" Kerenskii and later to "Mr. Comrade" Lenin, clearly reflect growing disarray in the distribution of state allowances in 1917. "Here and likely all across Russia, state funds are thoroughly plundered through the ostensibly legal distribution of allowances," six retired soldiers from the village of Nizhnie Kigi in Ufa province complained to Kerenskii in a petition of 19 August.

Why are payments given to the relatives of servicemen who do not need outside help because they are well-to-do and provided for? Why are payments given to families of servicemen, many of whom have deserted and live at home, doing regular work, even still in uniform? This is shameful and encourages desertion. Why are payments given to families of those over 40, who did not obey the order to join the army but stayed at home and work? One could point out more cases, but enough. Where is the Ministry of the Interior with its desire to cut back

<sup>64</sup> RGIA f. 1292, op. 7, d. 529 ("Ob izmenenii zakonopolozheniia o vydache prodo- vol'stvennogo posobiia sem'iam soldat"), ll. 7-7ob.

<sup>65</sup> N. L. Pushkareva and P. P. Shcherbinin, "Organizatsiia prizreniia semei nizhnikh chinov v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny," *Zhurnal issledovanii sotsial'noi politiki* 3, 2 (2005): 153-54.

on state expenditures? It and the various comptrollers there obviously do not see the massive plunder going on.<sup>66</sup>

Many complaints came in about village guardianships, not only from soldiers' wives and parents but also from soldiers themselves, on home leave or discharged from service. Retired soldier Anton Stepanenko informed the All-Russian Soviet Central Executive Committee from the village of Novobogdanovka in Tauride province of the misallocation of allowances in his village: "There are many who split the money with the village scribe. These people—one of them an elder and another a policeman—do whatever they like, since there are no soldiers in the village."<sup>67</sup> Konstantin Khorez, a soldier on leave from the village of Dorozhaev in Tver' province complained to the Petrograd Soviet about negligence, chaos, and disarray in the district guardianship, which "does not pay enough attention to investigating and, it is obvious, makes up how it gives out payments," following local customs and ignoring the level of need. "Comrades," the soldier asked, "where is justice, where is God, when it is obvious that people who have reached positions of power immediately oppress the poor laboring peasant."<sup>68</sup> The vocabulary of complainants became richer, with denunciations of "persons of the old regime" and "internal enemies."

The categorical demand for an increase in allowance was the most widespread. A typical example of the changed character of appeals to authorities is a resolution adopted on 14 August at a meeting of soldiers' wives in Matveevskaia township in Tver' province. Addressing the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet, they warned: "In the future, if payments are given out in the old way or we are informed that ... our resolution is not satisfied, we will demand and ask of our husbands: 'down with the war.' We in addition pledge to track down and denounce all deserters in general, so that they do not receive allowances improperly."<sup>69</sup> To confirm the seriousness of their intentions the soldiers' wives filled more than four pages with their signatures, mainly in the form of various scribbles.

Civic committees, frontline organizations, and local authorities, who at their end attested to the critical situation of soldiers' families, supported soldiers' wives' demands. The Economic Section of the Commission for Army Reform, reviewing the allowances question at a meeting on 2 June, agreed on the necessity of increasing allowances: "rising prices require a sympathetic

<sup>66</sup> RGIA f. 1292, op. 7, d. 592, ll. 77–78ob.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 87–87ob. (17 October 1917).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 88–89 (31 October 1917).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 69–71.

attitude toward this question." A letter accompanying materials about the allowance sent in late June from the War Minister's Cabinet to the Main Administration for the Local Economy of the Ministry of the Interior stated: "A great deal of information comes to the Cabinet daily about this matter, and it is one of those that upsets the army the most."<sup>70</sup>

A Ministry of the Interior committee established on 29 May 1917 to review existing legislation on the distribution of allowances allowed delegates of soldiers' wives from Petrograd, Kazan', Kostroma, and Arkhangel'sk to join its meetings and present their demands.<sup>71</sup> Although discussions of amendments to the legislation on allowances dragged on, it proved possible for the different sides to agree on some questions. For example, in discussions about allowances for soldiers' parents and grandparents, all agreed without reservation that men older than 55 and women older than 50 were unconditionally to be considered unable to work. The committee's recommendations were submitted to the appropriate departments for their conclusions, and then reviewed again at the Ministry of the Interior on 23–24 August and on 7 September at a meeting of ministry representatives, representing the state treasury's interests, and delegates from the All-Russian Executive Committee of Soldiers' and Workers' Soviets and the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Soviet of Peasants' Deputies, representing the interests of soldiers' families. Despite existing disagreements, the meeting found it necessary, in light of the democratic reforms underway in municipal and local government and the creation of a township-level *zemstvo* in particular,<sup>72</sup> to bring representatives of soldiers' families and delegates of local soviets into the guardianships and allowance offices.<sup>73</sup> Such efforts to bring soldiers' wives into the work of guardianships and local governments were not successful. The time to realize the Provisional Government's starry-eyed plans had already passed. Old government and civic structures were collapsing and new ones were only just being created. But the very fact that delegates of soldiers' wives participated in them demonstrates the emergence of hotbeds of organized struggle among women for their rights.

The bankruptcy of the Provisional Government became obvious. Allowances to soldiers' families represented a fundamental part of all state expenses. While the allowance on average was 2–3 rubles per person at the beginning of the war and 15 million rubles a month went to allowances, in September 1917 the allowance was 10–15 rubles, the number of recipients ex-

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 31–32.

<sup>71</sup> Bulgakova, "Privilegirovannye bedniaki," 466–76.

<sup>72</sup> *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporiazhenii pravitel'stva*, no. 182 (1917), art. 655.

<sup>73</sup> RGIA f. 1292, op. 7, d. 529, ll. 6ob.–7.



ceeded 37 million persons, and 323 million rubles a month were needed to pay allowances. According to the Ministry of the Interior 3.265 billion rubles were spent on allowances alone during the war. More than 430 million rubles a month, according to preliminary estimates, or more than 5 billion rubles a year, would be needed to continue paying allowances.<sup>74</sup> Banknotes issued by the Provisional Government rapidly lost their value, and inflation outstripped ministry estimates, but the Provisional Government still tried to its final days to fulfill the tsarist government's obligations to soldiers' families.

Delays in allowance payments, along with the reduction of charitable aid in the face of unstoppable rises in prices and the ruble's falling purchasing power, turned soldiers' wives into a menacing force. The soviets of soldiers', workers' and peasants' deputies also had a revolutionary effect on soldiers' wives. Their meetings, protest demonstrations, collective appeals to authorities, and disturbances became everyday phenomena. Reports of their discontent and unrest came in from all over the country.<sup>75</sup> "Women's riots" turned into a general wave of protest. Some guardianships were forced to capitulate under pressure from enraged elements: some threw off their responsibilities, others tried to bring in representatives of soldiers' wives, still others unsuccessfully called for help from the center. On 7 November A. Guteev, chairman of the Pogorel'tsevskaiia township administration in Tver' province, addressed the new government, asking it to satisfy soldiers' wives' demands quickly, "otherwise local organizations will be subjected to violent threats of popular punishment."<sup>76</sup> Declarations by soldiers' wives erased the border between freedom and license, equality and leveling, fairness and legality. Self-government turned into arbitrary rule, which led to the presentation to the government of ultimatums with unrealizable demands and to robbers' tactics along the lines of "grab and divide." The first act taken by Soviet power toward soldiers' wives was a call issued by the Council of People's Commissars on 18 November 1917, which noted that "some local soviets are resolving the question of allowances in a revolutionary manner, by confiscating money from the rich to pay allowances to soldiers' wives." Expressing complete sympathy with this approach, the Soviet government reminded citizens that "in the struggle against malfeasance and avarice on the part of the bourgeoisie, only spontaneous revolutionary action and revolutionary initiative by local

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., ll. 1ob., 20.

<sup>75</sup> Bulgakova, "Polozhenie soldatskikh semeistv v 1917 godu (Po materialam pravitel'stvennoi korrespondentsii," in *Noveishaia istoriia Otechestva XX–XXI veka*, vyp. 2 (Saratov: Nauka, 2007), 70–88.

<sup>76</sup> RGIA f. 1292, op. 7, d. 529, ll. 85–86ob.

soviets are capable of solving this painful question.”<sup>77</sup> In effect this was an open call for plunder and force.

The Russian home front was heterogeneous and crumbled easily. It was weakened by the internal contradictions rending the country, declining authority, violent political struggle, growing economic difficulties and social tension, and finally people’s exhaustion from living in wartime conditions. Soldiers’ wives were not only the largest and most costly “object of welfare” at the rear, but also an able-bodied if not always reliable home-front army. Like their husbands, soldiers’ wives poorly understood why Russia was fighting, and did not think about Constantinople, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Jingoistic slogans found no response among them, but this did not mean that they did not love their motherland. Women wanted the soonest possible return to peacetime life, and worried most of all about their daily survival and that of their children. They ended up willy-nilly on the left wing of the home front in the economic demands they presented to authorities, and in 1917 they began to display an element of political activism. Spontaneous actions by soldiers’ wives turned into organized struggle, but due to their dispersion across the empire’s vast expanses this organization was local in character. As a war unexampled in history continued for a fourth year, millions of soldiers’ families lived in poverty. With the mass impoverishment of the population, subsistence aid acquired enormous significance. The destruction of the state doomed many of them to death by hunger.

*Translated by Adele Lindenmeyr*

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<sup>77</sup> *Sobranie zakononii i rasporiazhenii rabocheho i krest’ianskogo pravitel’stva*, no. 3 (1917), art. 39.