

Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars

Zakhar Prilepin and his 'Literary *Spetsnaz*'

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In this article, Julie Fedor examines contemporary Russian militarism through an introduction to one of its most high-profile representatives, the novelist, Chechen war veteran and media personality Zakhar Prilepin. She focuses on Prilepin's commentary on war and Russian identity, locating his ideas within a broader strand of Russian neo-imperialism.

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in the Donbas which began that same year have been accompanied by a remarkable drive to mobilise cultural production in Russia in support of a new brand of state-sponsored militarism. Using a variety of media platforms and reaching mass popular audiences, a range of cultural celebrities – actors, writers, rock stars, tabloid war correspondents – have played a key role in framing and shaping domestic perceptions of Russia's 21st Century wars. Despite their prominence in Russian media space, their activities have received surprisingly little scholarly attention to date.

This article examines contemporary Russian militarism through an introduction to one of its most high-profile representatives, Zakhar Prilepin. A best-selling and award-winning novelist, Chechen war veteran, blogger, rapper, and TV presenter, Prilepin has been heavily engaged with the pro-Russian cause in the Donbas from early 2017 through mid-2018 in the capacity of an active celebrity combatant. As the popular face of the aggressive

brand of militarism that has come to pervade the Russian media landscape, Prilepin warrants our attention. Studying his career and output can help to illuminate the context and underpinnings of the domestic support for the official military doctrine and policy that is more commonly the subject of scholarship on Russian military and security affairs.

This article focuses on Prilepin's commentary on the nature of war and Russian identity, locating his ideas within a broader strand of Russian neo-imperialism in which war is claimed as a vital source of belonging, power and dignity.¹ It shows how the notion of a special Russian relationship to war, grounded in Russian historical experience and memory, is held up as both challenge and antidote to the Western liberal hegemonic order. The dominant Western civilian sensibility, casualty aversion and general decadence are contrasted to a Russian willingness to wage war and to die in war, a willingness that is proclaimed as both a defining feature of Russianness and a crucial geopolitical strategic advantage. Many of these ideas chime with the official rhetoric produced by the Russian

1. Prilepin might equally be classified as a nationalist; it should be noted that the boundary between neo-imperialism and nationalism in Russia is blurry and that these are not mutually exclusive concepts in the Russian case. On related terminological issues, see Pål Kolstø, 'Introduction: Russian Nationalism is Back – But Precisely What Does That Mean?', in Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (eds), *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–15* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 1–17.



Anti-Terrorist Operation in eastern Ukraine. Courtesy of Yevhen Sytkin/Wikimedia

leadership. They serve an important and ongoing trend towards the normalisation of war and violence more broadly in Russian popular culture and public life.

The article begins with a profile of Zakhar Prilepin and the evolution of his career to date. Next, it locates Prilepin within a tradition of Russian neo-imperialist writing on war and identity. Finally, it examines Prilepin's works within the frame of a broader campaign to produce new narratives and national symbols with the aim of legitimising and celebrating the resurgence of Russian military might on the world stage.

Zakhar Prilepin: Profile of a Freelance Propagandist

Zakhar Prilepin launched his literary career by writing on the theme of the Second Chechen War, in which he fought as part of the interior forces.² He is a former National Bolshevik, but like many nationalists, including National Bolshevik leader Eduard Limonov himself, Prilepin underwent a dramatic reversal of position after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, which prompted him to shift his allegiance towards the Putin regime.³ This moment of conversion is often highlighted in media coverage on Prilepin.⁴

2. See in particular his novel *Patologii [Pathologies]* (Moscow: Andreevskii Flag, 2005), which has been described as a hymn to the Russian army fighting in Chechnya; Yuri Kononov, 'Zakhar Prilepin. Geroi nashego vremeni' ['Zakhar Prilepin: Hero of our Time'], *Zavtra*, blog post, 23 October 2016, <http://zavtra.ru/blogs/zahar_prilepin>, accessed 30 September 2018. On Prilepin's career and his brand of patriotism, see Tomi Huttunen and Jussi Lassila, 'Zakhar Prilepin, the National Bolshevik Movement and Catachrestic Politics', *Transcultural Studies* (Vol. 12, No. 1, 2016), pp. 136–58; and Kirill Shteinbakh, 'Motiv nasiliia v proze Z. Prilepina' ['The Violence Motif in Z. Prilepin's Prose'], *Istoricheskaia i sotsial'no-obrazovatel'naia mysl' [Historical and Social-Educational Thought]* (Vol. 8, No. 4/1, 2016). Prilepin has also published under various pseudonyms, including Yevgenii Lavlinskii; see N V Krylova, 'Pisatel'-zhurnalistskii kak sub"ekt mediareal'nosti (na primere tvorcheskoi deiatel'nosti Zakhara Prilepina)' ['The Writer-Journalist as Subject of Media-Reality (a case study of the creative work of Zakhar Prilepin)'], *Uchenye zapiski Kazanskogo universiteta. Seria gumanitarnye nauki [Kazan University Scholarly Notes. Humanities Series]*, t. 158, kn. 4 (2016), p. 1033, n. 3. Prilepin took part in both Chechen wars.
3. Prilepin was also a prominent participant in the anti-Putin Dissenters' Marches. On nationalist responses to the Crimean annexation and the war in the Donbas, see Robert Horvath, 'The Euromaidan and the Crisis of Russian Nationalism', *Nationalities Papers* (Vol. 43, No. 6, November 2015), pp. 819–39.
4. See for example Yekaterina Sazhneva, 'Zakhar Prilepin: "To, chto zamenit minskii soglasheniia, udivit ves' mir"' ['Zakhar Prilepin: "What Replaces the Minsk Agreements will Surprise the Whole World"'], *Moskovskii komsomolets [Moscow Komsomol]*, 22 March 2017.

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Prilepin's claim to authority, and his macho public persona, is heavily based in his combat experience in the North Caucasus.⁵ He ridicules non-military writers and intellectuals for their lack of first-hand experience of warfare and often also, in this connection, their implied femininity.⁶ He is one of a growing number of war veterans present in the Russian media space, a trend which reflects a shift in the status of the veterans of Russia's recent wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya and elsewhere.⁷ Previously stigmatised and in the shadow of veterans of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45, veterans of Russia's late-Soviet and post-Soviet local conflicts have been redefined in Putin's Russia and lent a new aura of glamour and pathos.⁸

Russia's late-Soviet and post-Soviet local conflicts have been redefined in Putin's Russia and lent a new aura of glamour and pathos

Prilepin is skilled in the art of public relations and attracting media attention.⁹ His media ventures include *Tea with Zakhar*, a show on the nationalist Tsargrad television channel, in which Prilepin interviews fellow patriots in intimate man-to-man

conversations, against the backdrop of a nationalist kitsch set featuring abundant candles, curtains, marble statues, fake books and Russian tea sets. Tsargrad is a marginal channel, but Prilepin also appears frequently on federal state TV.¹⁰ He is also the chief editor of the *Svobodnaya Pressa* [*Free Press*] website, a musician and a playwright. His novels have won multiple prizes. He is famous for choosing to live in the provincial countryside (near Nizhnii Novgorod) rather than Moscow, and for his large family. Prilepin has four children, all by the same wife, making him in this respect an ideal poster boy for Russian official 'traditional values'. His family is a frequent matter of comment, both by Prilepin himself and by others, and Prilepin's publicity images routinely show him surrounded by his small blond children, with his wife, and often in a bucolic rural setting. In a 2012 lifestyle magazine profile piece, he discusses 'how to adapt military discipline for the family and how to sustain the mythology of the father in the family'.¹¹

Prilepin greeted the 2014 'Russian Spring' with delight as the realisation of long-held hopes for a resurgence of Russian power. He hailed the Crimean annexation as a vital turning point in Russia's post-Soviet history, marking an end to the dominance of what he called the 'hysterical' domestic media coverage of the Russian military campaigns in Chechnya and Georgia, and expressing

5. It should be noted that the nature of Prilepin's role and actions in the North Caucasus have been the subject of some speculation and controversy; see, for example, Aleksandr Klimov, 'Fenomen Zakhara Prilepina' ['The Phenomenon of Zakhar Prilepin'], *Zavtra*, blog post, 25 July 2017, <http://zavtra.ru/blogs/fenomen_zahara_prilepina>, accessed 26 November 2018.
6. See, for example, Zakhar Prilepin, 'Yesli Ganapol'skii pribezhit sdavat'sia, tarelku supa yemu nal'em' ['If Ganapol'skii Comes Running to Surrender, I'll Serve Him Up a Bowl of Soup'], *Komsomol'skaia pravda* [*Komsomol Truth*], 21 February 2017.
7. Another prominent example is Afghan war veteran and TV presenter Artem Sheinin, who notoriously said on air in October 2016 during a discussion about the death of DNR fighter Motorola, in response to the comment that Motorola was a killer, 'I've killed people too. So what? ... You're still sitting here talking with me. And for lots of people I'm completely legitimate'; Aleksei Obukhov, "'Ia ubival": vedushchii "Pervogo kanala" sdelal priznanie v efire' ["I've Killed People": "Channel One" Presenter Makes Confession on Air'], *Moskovskii komsomolets* [*Moscow Komsomol*], 21 October 2016, <<https://www.mk.ru/social/2016/10/21/ya-ubival-vedushchii-pervogo-kanala-sdelal-priznanie-v-efire.html>>, accessed 26 November 2018.
8. On this shift, see the special issue 'Back from Afghanistan: The Experiences of Soviet Afghan War Veterans', Felix Ackermann and Michael Galbas (eds), *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* (Vol. 1, No. 2, 2015).
9. One of the best-known scandals associated with Prilepin relates to his 2012 neo-Stalinist, anti-Semitic 'Letter to Comrade Stalin'; Zakhar Prilepin, 'Pis'mo tovarishchu Stalinu', *Svobodnaia pressa* [*Free Press*], 30 July 2012, <<http://svpressa.ru/society/article/57411/>>, accessed 30 September 2018.
10. He has presented, as of December 2017, the show *Uroki russkogo s Zakharom Prilepinym* [*Russian Lessons with Zakhar Prilepin*] on NTV, and a music show *Sol'* [*Salt*] on RenTV; he recently also appeared in a series of debates with oppositional figure Kseniia Sobchak on the liberal station Dozhd' TV. In 2016, he delivered a masterclass at the Russian Defence Ministry's Military University; see Dmitrii Semenov, 'Sreda obshcheniia' ['Social Milieu'], *Krasnaia zvezda* [*Red Star*], 22 April 2016. Prilepin also played the role of a Donbas militia fighter in the movie *Dezhurstvo* [*Phone Duty*], directed by Lenar Kamalov, which won a prize at the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival in New York.
11. Ol'ga Spirina, 'Deti: interv'iu s pisatelem Zakharom Prilepinym, ottsom chetverykh detei' ['Children: An Interview with Writer Zakhar Prilepin, Father of Four Children'], *Posta Magazine*, <<http://posta-magazine.ru/lifestyle/interview-zahar-prilepin>>, accessed 30 September 2018.

the hope that ‘the Crimean story will give a kind of super-brutal revolutionary impulse inside the country, so that it undergoes a metamorphosis.’¹² Prilepin has been actively involved in the Donbas conflict, initially as a war correspondent and as an activist organising charity rock concerts in aid of the pro-Russian side and delivering humanitarian supplies to the local population.¹³ From 2015 to mid-2018 Prilepin was employed as adviser to the head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR), Aleksandr Zakharchenko; in a move that has prompted speculation and conspiracy theorising when, Prilepin, citing health problems, left Zakharchenko’s service a few weeks before the latter was assassinated in August 2018.¹⁴ Apparently on commission from Kremlin ‘grey cardinal’ Vladislav Surkov, Prilepin published a popular biography of Zakharchenko in 2016.¹⁵

Prilepin hailed the Crimean annexation as a vital turning point in Russia’s post-Soviet history

In early 2017 Prilepin’s involvement in the war moved to another level after he announced that he

was forming his own battalion to fight in the Donbas for the DNR.¹⁶ This led to his being hailed in the newspaper *Moskovskii komsomolets* as not just both writer and soldier, but also ‘perhaps, a prophet’;¹⁷ the popular tabloid *Komsomol’skaia pravda* described him as a ‘hero of our time’ for the 2000s, and the ‘Byron of Donetsk’.¹⁸ Other commentators predicted that Prilepin would write ‘the first great novel’ about the war in the Donbas, which ‘our children and grandchildren will use to study the history of the second decade of the 21st Century’.¹⁹ Prilepin followed up his announcement with an online video clip in which he held up a peace sign and delivered a mock-serious speech about the writer’s duty to oppose war, before tearing up the peace sign and ordering his men to open fire on Ukrainian positions.²⁰

Later, in May 2017, Prilepin led the creation of a new ‘Russian Artistic Alliance’ (*Russkii khudozhestvennyi soiuz*), aimed at challenging the liberal-dominated cultural establishment by bringing together ‘patriotic’ artists and writers.²¹ Prilepin described this initiative as a move to reflect the popular mood in society. He commented that: ‘The country is living in a state of imperial, patriotic arousal, but in the sphere of culture ... nothing is happening’, because the beneficiaries of the ‘liberal-democratic coup’ of 1991 had taken over the culture industry and were now

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12. All translations from the Russian are the author’s own, unless otherwise indicated. *Afisha Daily*, ‘Zakhar Prilepin: “Ya chuvstvuiu zhivuiu radost’, ottogo chto opiat’ vyzval beshenstvo”’ [‘Zakhar Prilepin: “I Feel Real Joy at Having Made People Furious Again”’], 9 April 2014, <<http://daily.afisha.ru/archive/vozduh/books/zakhar-prilepin-russkiy-chelovek-neizmenen-v-etom-zalog-ego-sushchestvovaniya>>, accessed 30 September 2018.
 13. Sazhneva, ‘Zakhar Prilepin’.
 14. RIA Novosti, ‘Prilepin ob”iavil ob ukhode s posta zamkombata armii DNR’ [‘Prilepin Announces Departure from Post of DNR Army Deputy Battalion Commander’], 9 July 2018, <<https://ria.ru/culture/20180709/1524260781.html>>, accessed 30 September 2018.
 15. Zakhar Prilepin, *Vse, chto dolzhno razreshit’sia ... khronika idushchei voiny* [Everything that Must Be Solved ... Chronicle of an Ongoing War] (Moscow: AST, 2016). On the Surkov connection, see Dmitrii Gomon, ‘Novye pis’ma ot Surkova: “Kreativnye” idei rasshatyvaniia Ukrainy’ [‘New Letters from Surkov: “Creative” Ideas for Destabilising Ukraine’], *Espresso.tv*, 4 November 2016, <https://ru.espresso.tv/article/2016/11/04/novye_pysma_ot_surkova_quotkreativnyequot_ydey_rasshatyvanyya_ukrainy>, accessed 30 September 2018.
 16. It has been argued that this represented an attempt to fill the vacant media space left by the deaths of celebrity Donbas field commanders Motorola (Arsenii Pavlov) and Givi (Mikhail Tolstykh); see Aleksei Kuvshinov, “‘Russkaia vesna’: versia 2.0’ [“Russian Spring”: Version 2.0], *The New Times*, No. 5, 20 February 2017.
 17. Sazhneva, ‘Zakhar Prilepin’. All translations from the Russian are the author’s own, unless otherwise indicated.
 18. *Komsomol’skaia pravda* [Komsomol Truth], ‘Kto teper’ Prilepin—donetskii Bairon ili naemnik vne zakona?’ [‘Who is Prilepin Now: The Donetsk Byron or a Mercenary Outlaw?’], 16 February 2017. As the article’s headline suggests, this article also raised the issue of the legality and ethics of Prilepin’s actions in Ukraine.
 19. Oleg Bondarenko, ‘Russkii literator na beregu gosudarstva’ [‘Russian Litterateur Looking after the State’], *Moskovskii komsomolets* [Moscow Komsomol], 16 February 2017.
 20. Korrespondent.net, ‘Zakhar Prilepin v DNR otdaval komandy zenitke’ [‘Zakhar Prilepin Gave Orders to Zenitka in the DNR’], 13 March 2017, <<https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/3826136-zakhar-prylepyn-v-dnr-otdaval-komandy-zenytke>>, accessed 30 September 2018.
 21. See the Alliance’s official website: <<http://rh-soyuz.ru/>>, accessed 26 November 2018.

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effectively blocking access to mainstream media for all cultural figures supporting the pro-Russian side in the Donbas.²² He described this as ‘a conspiracy’, resulting in an ‘absurd’ situation: ‘The country is solving its tasks, which the majority of the population supports, but in culture everything’s the opposite.’²³

In numerous works published since the war in Ukraine began, Prilepin salutes the advent of a new Russian bellicosity. His introduction to a 2016 volume presents this as a grassroots social phenomenon, arising from below in response to the accumulated experience of the geopolitical events of the post-Cold War era:

This book is about the presentiment of war, and about how this presentiment is suddenly beginning to be realised ... a new chain of wars is beginning, linked to the movement towards restoring the collapsed empire. ... It’s about how Russian guys are reflecting, taking a look, and finally trying out the feel of weapons in their hands. Serbia, Iran, Tajikistan, Osetia, Abkhazia, Azerbaijan, Chechnya ... Guys are travelling to ‘hot spots’, they see everything with their own eyes, they join the ‘Interbrigades’,²⁴ they rush to the Donbass ... Men are going to war. Homeless officers and dropout students, adventurers and idealists, volunteers and mercenaries, political fanatics and fashionable journalists ... Nobody is forcing them to go to war; attempts are even being made to stop them. ... This book is for and about those

who are going to war. ... Get to know them. We’re all going to be seeing a lot more of them.²⁵

Here and elsewhere, Prilepin frames the war in Ukraine as part of a grand narrative of contemporary history in which the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wars of the 1990s are recast as a prelude to Russia’s current revival.

Just as the war in Ukraine is difficult to classify using conventional categories, so too do its propagandists often defy easy categorisation.²⁶ On the one hand, Zakhar Prilepin is certainly engaged in producing what Valentina Feklyunina has called ‘strategic narratives’ aimed at furthering Russian policy objectives through propaganda instruments.²⁷ But it would be incorrect to view Prilepin as a mere mouthpiece of the Kremlin. He is better thought of as a ‘freelancer’, who has been willing to lend his services to the regime at particular moments of ideological convergence.²⁸ Publicly at least, he insists on his political independence, and it may be that the force of Prilepin’s personality renders him a particularly effective propagandist, precisely because of the aura of autonomy that he projects.²⁹ With this perspective in mind, the case of Prilepin’s career offers a useful corrective

22. Dmitrii Steshin, ‘Zakhar Prilepin protiv fanatov “Golubogo sala”’ [‘Zakhar Prilepin versus Fans of “Blue Lard”’], *Komsomol’skaia pravda [Komsomol Truth]* (Vologda), 17 May 2017, <<http://www.vologda.kp.ru/daily/26679/3702725/>>, accessed 31 May 2017.
23. *Ibid.*
24. That is, the Drugaia Rossiia (Other Russia) movement set up to recruit volunteers to fight in Ukraine.
25. The text quoted is drawn from the jacket blurb and from Zakhar Prilepin, ‘Russkii patsan s oruzhiem v rukakh’ [‘The Russian Lad Armed’], in Zakhar Prilepin (ed.), *Limonka’v voinu [‘Limonka’ Goes to War]* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2016).
26. On the war, see Serhy Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Nikolay Mitrokhin, ‘Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia’s War in the Donbass’, *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 2015).
27. Valentina Feklyunina, ‘Russia’s Soft Power Beyond the Post-Soviet Space’, in Natasha Kuhrt and Valentina Feklyunina (eds), ‘Assessing Russia’s Power: A Report’, King’s College London and Newcastle University, 2017, p. 34.
28. Prilepin’s colleague and partner Aleksandr Kazakov, who has also been engaged in PR activities linked to the war in Donbas, called himself a ‘freelancer’ during an interview with Prilepin on *Tea with Zakhar*, Tsargrad TV, 26 November 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73jKqL0ydm0>>, accessed 30 September 2018. On the techniques employed by PR image-makers and ‘political technologists’ in Russia and Ukraine, see Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2005). For a sketch of another ‘freelancer’ of this kind, Yuri Degtiarev, see Julie Fedor and Rolf Fredheim, “‘We Need More Clips About Putin, and Lots of Them’: Russia’s State-Commissioned Online Visual Culture”, *Nationalities Papers* (Vol. 45, No. 2, 2017), pp. 161–81.
29. See, for example, his comments in ‘Zakhar Prilepin protiv fanatov “Golubogo sala”’ [‘Zakhar Prilepin versus Fans of “Blue Lard”’]. One commentator on his work argues that Prilepin’s well-developed worldview enables him to attain greater objectivity in his journalism and to ‘avoid pressure on the part of a publication, editor, genre and so on’; Krylova, ‘Pisatel’-zhurnalist’ [‘Writer-Journalist’], p. 1035. The same article describes Prilepin as ‘one of those [journalists] whose reactions to the events unfolding in Ukraine have been swift and of a high quality’; Krylova, ‘Pisatel’-zhurnalist’ [‘Writer-Journalist’], p. 1033.

to the standard model of a top-down ‘Kremlin propaganda machine’.

Russian Neo-Imperialist Philosophies of War

Prilepin positions himself within a broader tradition, tracing his intellectual and ideological lineage to ‘father Eduard and grandpa Sasha’, the prominent Russian writers and ideologues Eduard Limonov (born 1943) and Aleksandr Prokhanov (born 1938). In a 2008 tribute marking Limonov’s 65th jubilee and Prokhanov’s 70th, Prilepin wrote:

with their miracle-working energy over the course of two past decades they created diverse ideological, political and aesthetic meanings, they engendered whole movements, fans and followers ... It is precisely father Eduard and grandpa Sasha who wrote the most important, the most awe-inspiring, the most passionate texts of recent times.³⁰

Aleksandr Prokhanov and Eduard Limonov are established neo-imperialist writers with complicated political, ideological and literary biographies.³¹ Both are representatives of a recent shift examined by Boris Noordenbos whereby a series of important Russian writers have come to ‘adopt politically engaged stances and insert themselves into debates about national destiny’.³² This article focuses on their writings on the subject of war.

Prokhanov, Limonov and Prilepin are frequently grouped together by literary critics.³³ Literary scholar Natal’ia Ivanova sees these three authors as representatives of three distinct generations of politically engaged Russian writers. She defines these generations based on the nature of their experiences of war. The first generation, represented by Prokhanov, was sent by the state to report back from various ‘hot spots’ in the late Cold War. Second-generation writers such as Limonov actually fought in wars themselves, and the third generation was the product of war — these were writers ‘born in war, real war’ in the North Caucasus.³⁴ In fact, the boundaries between these categories are somewhat less neat than what Ivanova describes. By Prokhanov’s own admission, for example, although he travelled to war zones as a journalist and a writer, he also carried and used arms during his time in Afghanistan and elsewhere.³⁵

Both Prokhanov and Limonov have travelled to numerous war zones. Both did so in several overlapping capacities: as journalists; as active combatants; and as writers gathering material and inspiration for their ideological texts about Russian identity and Russian history. Both have chronicled the death and rebirth of empire, sharing a focus on the ‘last imperial wars’ of the late Soviet era, but also looking ahead to future wars.³⁶ Limonov laments the dismemberment of Russian territory with the Soviet collapse: ‘Our borders are bloody

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30. NZ ExLibris, ‘Otets Eduard i ded Sasha na fone kosmosa’ [‘Father Eduard and Grandpa Sasha against the Backdrop of the Cosmos’], 28 February 2008, <http://www.ng.ru/ng_exlibris/2008-02-28/1_yubilei.html>, accessed 30 September 2018. Elsewhere Prilepin described himself as identifying with Prokhanov and Limonov but said that he had not yet attained their level: ‘They’ve lived through a huge, honest, terrible life, and I’ve only just begun’; Vera Baldyniuk, ‘Zakhar Prilepin: “Za schet kitaitsev ya tak i ne razbogatel”’ [‘Zakhar Prilepin: “I Didn’t End Up Getting Rich at the Expense of the Chinese After All”’], *Ib.ua*, 26 August 2009, <https://lb.ua/culture/2009/08/26/6324_zahar_prilepin_za_schet_kitaytsev.html>, accessed 28 August 2017.
 31. On which, see Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian Identity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Prokhanov’s own potted version of his biography can be found here: Aleksandr Prokhanov, ‘O voine, istorii i imperii’ [‘On War, History and Empire’], *Izorskii klub [The Izorsk Club]*, 15 July 2014, <<http://izorsk-club.ru/3529>>, accessed 25 January 2018.
 32. Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*, p. 3.
 33. See, for example, Baldyniuk, ‘Zakhar Prilepin’.
 34. Natal’ia Ivanova, *Russkii kres: Literatura i chitatel’ v nachale novogo veka [The Russian Cross: Literature and the Reader at the Start of a New Century]* (Moscow: Vremia, 2011). On Limonov’s participation in various military conflicts in the 1980s–90s, see Eduard Limonov, ‘Psy voiny’ [‘Hounds of War’] (1993) and ‘Fighting Instinct’, published in *Limonka* 185 (December 2001) and reprinted in A N Volynets and A S Tishin (eds), *Okopnaia pravda chechenskoi voiny [Trench Truth of the Chechen War]* (Moscow: Yauza-Press, 2007), pp. 146–54.
 35. Prokhanov, ‘O voine, istorii i imperii’ [‘On War, History and Empire’].
 36. See, for example, Limonov’s ‘Psy voiny’ [‘Hounds of War’]. Prokhanov styles himself as the ‘Last Soldier of the Empire’, and used the phrase as the title for his 2003 novel: *Poslednii soldat imperii [The Empire’s Last Soldier]* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2003).

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wounds', he has written, but '[w]ars shall join Russian civilisation together as one'.³⁷

Limonov and Prokhanov praise war as a source of meaning, authenticity and power. Both see war as more a matter of biology than of ideology. Prokhanov casts war as a fundamentally generative process: 'for me war is something where fathers die, so as to give their children the possibility of life'.³⁸ Limonov posits the existence of a 'warrior's instinct' which is more important than ideology.³⁹ In his 2001 article 'Fighting Instinct', he wrote that 'after thousands of hours spent with people of war, I have developed the firm conviction that war is not a sin of humanity, not a remnant of the past, not a shameful instinct, but an intimate mighty instinct of aggression, an instinct of heroism'.⁴⁰ Prilepin agrees with Limonov that 'aggression is a quality biologically inherent to human beings', but he also links this to nationality, warning that 'nations which lose their ... masculine qualities under the influence of ... total political correctness ... risk losing their identity altogether, and their place of residence too'.⁴¹ Both Limonov and Prilepin are contemptuous of what they call the 'emasculated' state of modern Western men,⁴² and admiring of Chechen fighters with their 'heightened martial instinct'.⁴³ Limonov has described his first impressions of Chechen fighters in Abkhazia in 1992: 'all of them small, in black overalls and bandannas, self-confident, hung around with weapons. "Like the 'wild boys' from a William Burroughs novel", I thought. ... They were photogenic and fresh, as though they were at a fashion show'.⁴⁴ Prilepin and Limonov share a taste for this aesthetic, and in general, Prilepin's persona

appears to be closely modelled on what Fabrizio Fenghi has called Limonov's 'macho-nationalist' public image.⁴⁵

Russian Cultural Responses to the War in Ukraine

Since the beginning of the war in the Donbas, Prokhanov has enjoined writers and artists to rise to the task of producing art and poetry glorifying those fighting for the pro-Russian side. In August 2014, the newspaper *Izvestiia* published one of his programmatic calls to action:

The war in Novorossia ought to have become a treasure house for patriotic painters, artists and musicians. By now, after several months of bloody, unprecedented war, there ought to have appeared canvases depicting the battles of the militia, burning tanks, battle planes swooping onto cities, and fighters shooting them down. ... Russian artist, don't sit in the sauna, don't sun yourself on the lawn, don't drink subtle fragrant wines! Set off for Novorossia! And may your pictures become mirrors reflecting the new world, engulfed by flame.⁴⁶

Prokhanov sees these tasks as so urgent because, like Prilepin, he views the Crimean annexation as having created a unique political opportunity to consolidate a new vision of Russian identity based on a drive to rebuild Russia as an imperial power. In August 2014 Prokhanov compared Crimea to a prince who had 'kissed the sleeping beauty – Russia – and awakened her. Our task is not to let her fall asleep again'.⁴⁷

37. Eduard Limonov, *Ubiistvo chasovogo (Dnevnik grazhdanina) [The Killing of a Sentry (Diary of a Citizen)]* (Moscow: Amfora, 2002).
38. Prokhanov, 'O voine, istorii i imperii ['On War, History and Empire'].
39. Limonov, 'Psy voiny' ['Hounds of War'].
40. Limonov, 'Fighting Instinct', p. 147.
41. Cited in Sergei Grachev, "'My ne zaichiki!'" ["'We're Not Bunny Rabbits!'", *Argumenty i fakty [Arguments and Facts]*, No. 29, 20 July 2016.
42. See for example Limonov's works *Ubiistvo chasovogo [Killing of a Sentry]*; 'Psy voiny' ['Hounds of War']; and 'Fighting Instinct'.
43. Limonov, 'Fighting Instinct'.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 148–51.
45. Fabrizio Fenghi, 'Making Post-Soviet Counterpublics: The Aesthetics of Limonka and the National-Bolshevik Party', *Nationalities Papers* (Vol. 45, No. 2, 2017), p. 185. See further on Limonov and the evolution of his political views and strategies, Robert Horvath, "'Sakharov Would be With Us': Limonov, Strategy-31, and the Dissident Legacy', *Russian Review* (Vol. 74, No. 4, October 2015), pp. 581–98.
46. Aleksandr Prokhanov, 'Pevtsy i podletsy' ['Singers and Scoundrels'], *Izvestiia [The News]*, 17 August 2014. On the Russian cultural response to the Novorossia cause, see also Diana Kolobaeva, "'Kiev Kaput': Donbas v literature ot Limonova do Prilepina" ["'Kiev Kaput': Donbas in Literature from Limonov to Prilepin"], *Federal'noe Agentstvo Novostei*, 10 April 2015, <<https://riafan.ru/235099-kiev-kaput-donbas-v-literature-ot-a-do-prilepina>>, accessed 30 September 2018.
47. Aleksei Grinin, "'Krym" Aleksandra Prokhanova — russkaia mechta i russkoe chudo' ['Aleksandr Prokhanov's "Crimea" — Russian Dream and Russian Miracle'], *ridus.ru*, 18 September 2014, <<https://www.ridus.ru/news/167742>>, accessed

Prilepin is one of the writers to have responded most energetically to Prokhanov's call to mobilise Russian cultural production around the war in Ukraine.⁴⁸ Since the war began, he has repeatedly expressed his admiration for the pro-Russian militia fighting in Ukraine, comparing them to mythical figures from Russian history.⁴⁹ He has spearheaded a campaign to create what he calls a 'Russian literary *spetsnaz*'⁵⁰ – in other words, to recruit Russian writers, past and present, in the service of an updated 21st Century vision of Russian militarism, and of a Russian national identity rooted in the celebration of war.

In February 2017 Prilepin published the book *Platoon: The Officers and Militia of Russian Literature*, a collection of sketches of Russian Golden Age writers aimed at rediscovering and celebrating their forgotten militarism.⁵¹ In this book Prilepin claims Alexander Pushkin and other classic Russian writers as militarists. Were they alive today, Prilepin argues, Tolstoy and Pushkin

would be fighting for the DNR in the Donbas.⁵² Prilepin also draws a linear connection between these traditions and the work of the Kremlin's modern-day war correspondents, proclaiming for example that “modernised” hussar traditions in their latest incarnation are manifested today in the poetry and the behavioral model of the fearless correspondent of the Donbas and Syrian wars, comrade and drinking partner of all the legendary field commanders, Semen Pegov.⁵³ Prilepin warns that we should be cautious in claiming the right to condemn war as evil; ‘War is more ancient than art’, he writes – indeed, ‘war is itself art’; the world we live in is one that has been shaped by war, which is the key engine of history.⁵⁴ Prilepin's project evidently enjoyed high-level support. His book was published in partnership with the Russian Military History Society, which is headed by Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii, and in June 2018 extracts from *Platoon* were dramatised and adapted into an NTV documentary entitled ‘Zakhar Prilepin's War and

28 August 2017. Prokhanov himself has produced two novels about the Ukrainian war so far: *Krym [Crimea]* (2014), and *Ubiistvo gorodov [Murder of Cities]* (2015, 2nd ed. 2017).

48. Prilepin was among the writers praised by Prokhanov for this; see Aleksandr Prokhanov, ‘Vo stane russkikh voinov’ [‘In the Camp of the Russian Warriors’], *Izvestia*, 6 April 2015.
49. See, for example, ‘Literaturnyi mrakobes’ [‘The Literary Reactionary’], *NRC.eu*, 30 November 2014.
50. See, for example, Iuliia Shigareva, ‘Zakhar Prilepin: “U nas za spinoi stoit spetsnaz russkoi literatury”’ [‘Zakhar Prilepin: “The *Spetsnaz* of Russian Literature Stands Behind Us”’], *Argumenty i fakty [Arguments and Facts]*, 22 February 2017.
51. Zakhar Prilepin, *Vzvod. Ofitsery i opolchentsy russkoi literatury* (Moscow: AST, 2017). A journalist commented: ‘We live with war constantly. Reports from the front have become almost obligatory in the TV news, like the weather forecast. So why not have a talk about war using 19th Century material? After all writers [at that time] really did fight. They actually fought, not just watching war on television. And they killed; they “put down an uprising in Poland”, and “annexed Finland”, and “went to serve in the Caucasus”. This is true, after all. Prilepin has talked about this a hundred times in articles and interviews. But it's one thing to talk, and another to prove it’ (as he does in this book); Pavel Basinskii, ‘Perezagruzim Zolotoi vek?’ [‘Shall We Re-load the Golden Age?’], *Rossiiskaia gazeta [The Russian Gazette]*, 13 February 2017.
52. Cited in Aleksandr Kots, ‘Politrak Prilepin’ [‘Political Commissar Prilepin’], *Komsomol'skaia pravda [Komsomol Truth]*, 13 February 2017. Prilepin says here that Pushkin and Chaadaev were ‘men of simply abnormal courage. Real Donetsk militia men. Apart from fighting war they also fought duels constantly. To be honest, I don't really know any litterateurs like this in Russia today. We're all the sick children of the Silver Age, of the early 20th Century. Drug addiction, sleaze, sin, the habit of drawing a line: “I love the Motherland, but I don't love the state”’; Kots, ‘Politrak Prilepin’ [‘Political Commissar Prilepin’].
53. Prilepin, *Vzvod [Platoon]*, p. 353. *Life.ru* war correspondent and poet Semen Pegov is one of a number of Russian war reporters who has gained phenomenal popularity in the course of the wars in Ukraine and Syria. Pegov was named by *NewsMedia* as 2014 Man of the Year for his coverage of the conflict in Ukraine (see front cover of his book: Semen Pegov, *Ia i ryzhii separ* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2017). Other Russian war correspondents who have become household names through their coverage of this war include *Komsomol'skaia pravda*'s Dmitrii Steshin and Aleksandr Kots. New annual military journalism awards were introduced by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation in March 2015, and some military journalists are also reported to have been secretly decorated by the state for their coverage of the Ukrainian events; see ‘Ministr oborony Sergei Shoigu nagradil rossiiskikh voennykh zhurnalistov’ [‘Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu Decorates Russian Military Journalists’], *NTV*, 27 April 2018, <<https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2010781/>>, accessed 26 November 2018, and Oleg Kashin, ‘Sekretnye medali za nesekretnuu operatsiiu’ [‘Secret Medals for a Non-Secret Operation’], *openDemocracy Russia*, 27 May 2014.
54. Prilepin, *Vzvod [Platoon]*, p. 346.

Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars

Peace', interspersed with footage on Prilepin as battalion commander in the Donbas.⁵⁵

Prilepin has made it his mission to reclaim the cause of the warrior. He laments the fact that the prevailing Russian attitude views war as 'hopelessly outdated, unnecessary, and in general ugly', and that as a result, most poets have stopped writing odes to military victories.⁵⁶ And yet, Prilepin writes, even though the Russian literary establishment has turned its back on the military theme, the Russian army has remained true to its mission and has 'stayed here, with us, among the soil and the blood'.⁵⁷ Here and elsewhere, Prilepin's 'us' is clearly addressed to a particular audience: the disenfranchised, the dissatisfied and the alienated, especially those with a military or law enforcement background.⁵⁸ War here offers a ticket out of insignificance; out of the provinces; a means of escape from 'grey lives';⁵⁹ and a chance to play a role in something bigger than oneself, to join 'history'.⁶⁰

Prilepin also frames the war in the Donbas as having special significance for his age cohort. Born in 1975, Prilepin represents the generation whose formative years coincided with the Soviet collapse and its immediate aftermath, and who also make up a substantial proportion of the Russian

volunteers fighting in the Donbas. Prilepin has often commented on this phenomenon, and he also cites at length the reflections by former DNR head Aleksandr Zakharchenko (born 1976) on this topic. Zakharchenko highlights the fact that this generation, which was raised to believe in the Red Army's supreme power, was 'abandoned' when the Soviet Union collapsed.⁶¹ Zakharchenko recounts the emotions linked to this sense of abandonment: 'There was a terrible shame over everything that was happening. Already then there was a crazy feeling of hurt. This is how I remember it now—a feeling settled in my soul, like I'd been covered in shit'.⁶² Prilepin narrates his own biography in similar fashion, describing the shock and disillusionment that came with the Soviet collapse, and describing the war in the Donbas as offering his generation a chance at 'revanche' for these humiliations.⁶³

Prilepin notes that his was the last generation to be raised on the romance of Soviet militarism, on the literature of Arkadii Gaidar. Later post-Soviet generations had been successfully brainwashed into believing that 'only stupid people fight wars', and so this mission had fallen to the last Soviet generation, the only one still capable of resisting the onslaught of Western emasculating liberal

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55. 'Voina i mir Zakhara Prilepina' ['Zakhar Prilepin's War and Peace'], from the series *NTV-zidenie [NTV-Vision]* (2018), screened on NTV on 8 June 2018, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm0s_6EfKSs>, accessed 30 September 2018.
 56. Prilepin, *Vzvod [Platoon]*, p. 348.
 57. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
 58. See, for example, Prilepin's comments cited in 'Zakhar Prilepin: Kogda sidim v tanke, my vse—russkie!' ['Zakhar Prilepin: When We're Sitting in a Tank, We're All Russians!'], *Komsomol'skaia pravda [Komsomol Truth]*, 22 November 2016; and Kots, 'Politruk Prilepin' ['Political Commissar Prilepin'].
 59. As Ivan Okhlobystin put it in October 2014, the war in Ukraine had offered 'tens of thousands of Russian lads ... a pretext for becoming a sacrifice to God's glory! For piercing their grey lives through with heroic feats, like lightning'; Ivan Okhlobystin, 'Monolog: "Spasibo tebe, Ukraina!"' ['Monologue: "Thank You, Ukraine!"]', *Antifashist [Anti-Fascist]*, 6 October 2014, <<http://antifashist.com/item/ivan-okhlobystin-monolog-spasibo-tebe-ukraina.html>>, accessed 30 September 2018. Okhlobystin also welcomes the war as a force that has crystallised Russian identity, 'teaching us to be Russians again ... giving us new heroes and martyrs. Forcing us to respect and even sometimes delight in our president'; Okhlobystin, 'Monolog' ['Monologue'].
 60. As the song by Aleksandr Skliar (with whom Prilepin has toured the Donbas handing out free CDs) put it, 'When war is on the doorstep, / It doesn't matter whether you're a warrior, a worker, a poet, / Everyone has his place in history, / Only traitors have no place there'; 'Zakhar Prilepin: Kogda sidim v tanke, my vse—russkie!' ['Zakhar Prilepin: When We're Sitting in a Tank, We're All Russians!'].
 61. Cited in Prilepin, *Vse, chto dolzhno razreshit'sia [Everything that Must be Resolved]*, p. 71.
 62. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
 63. See Prilepin's comments during the press conference for the launch of *Vse, chto dolzhno razreshit'sia [Everything that Must be Resolved]*, at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdbQwUtcHuA>> (at approximately 8:50), accessed 26 November 2018. See also his statement that 'For me of course the collapse of the Union was a tragedy. ... And for the entire '90s I perceived everything happening in Russia as one unending tragedy, as torment ... like I was living on occupied territory'; cited in Aleksandr Kots and Dmitrii Steshin, 'Zakhar Prilepin: "Yesli ne pobedit', tak vyiti iz draki s chest'iu"' ['Zakhar Prilepin: "If You Can't Win, At Least Come Out of the Fight with Your Honour Intact"]', *Komsomol'skaia pravda [Komsomol Truth]*, 7 July 2015, <<https://www.kp.ru/daily/26402/3278694/>>, accessed 25 January 2018.

anti-war ideology, and of restoring and reviving the memory of Russian martial traditions.

Conclusion

In 2014, during his annual *Direct Line* live interactive TV broadcast, President Putin was asked: ‘What does the Russian person, the Russian nation mean to you? What are its pluses and minuses, its strengths and weaknesses?’ In his response, Putin identified what he called an ‘exceptionally powerful genetic code’ that was shared by Russians: ‘This genetic code ... is one of our chief competitive advantages [when it comes to operating] in the external world. It’s very supple, stable. We don’t even feel this, but this definitely exists’.⁶⁴

Putin went on to define one of the key features of this code as a willingness to give up one’s life. Other nations viewed death as something horrifying, and were unable to comprehend the Russian view on the importance of [d]eath for one’s friends, for one’s nation [*narod*], to put it in modern language, for the Fatherland. This is where the deep roots of our patriotism lie. And this is also the source of our mass heroism in times of military conflict and war, and even self-sacrifice in peacetime’.⁶⁵

As this quote shows, there are important ways in which Zakhar Prilepin’s philosophies of war and Russian identity chime with the official rhetoric of the Russian leadership. From the statue of Mikhail Kalashnikov unveiled in Moscow in 2017,⁶⁶ to the Ministry of Defence’s new ‘Patriot’ military theme park opened in 2015,⁶⁷ the celebration of war occupies a central position in the symbolic trappings of the new state ideology currently taking shape in Russia. In this landscape, public

figures like Zakhar Prilepin play an important role as popular cultural champions of a provocative, bellicose brand of Russian nationalism. The case of Prilepin highlights the ways in which Russia’s challenge to the post-war security architecture and international rules-based order has been accompanied by a popular drumbeat, as the mythical figure of the Russian warrior is reclaimed and updated for the 21st Century. ■

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64. Regnum.ru, ‘Vladimir Putin: Dlia russkikh na miru i smert’ krasna’ [‘Vladimir Putin: For Russians Even Death is Beautiful When We’re United’], 17 April 2014, <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1792501.html>>, accessed 26 November 2018. Quotation is author’s (loose) translation of the Russian saying ‘na miru i smert’ krasna’ (lit.: even death is beautiful within the peasant commune).
65. Regnum.ru, ‘Vladimir Putin: Dlia russkikh’ [‘Vladimir Putin: For Russians’].
66. RBK.ru, ‘Kul’turnyiy brend ili urodstvo: v Moskve otkryli pamiatnik Kalashnikovu’ [‘Cultural Brand or Monstrosity: Monument to Kalashnikov Unveiled in Moscow’], 19 September 2017, <<https://www.rbc.ru/photoreport/19/09/2017/59c0cf599a79477897c87b96>>, accessed 26 November 2018.
67. ‘Patriot’ Park: Russian Federation Armed Forces Military-Patriotic Park of Culture and Recreation official website, <<https://patriotp.ru/>>, accessed 26 November 2018.