

# The Shattered Self of Komsomol Civil War Memoirs

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Komsomol literature in the 1920s repeatedly evoked the memory of the civil war as a means to inspire young communists to sacrifice themselves for the construction of socialism.<sup>1</sup> In the words of Alfred Kurella, “The heroic times of the civil war presently take on a great role in satisfying youth’s romantic proclivities.” The war, he explained, bound the Komsomol around a “single principle,” for it recalled a time when all “surrendered to one great purpose” and “individual identity was significant only as part of a large family. Everybody conformed to the principle that bestowed life or death.”<sup>2</sup> Like other European nations, which used memories of World War I in the construction of national unity, the Komsomol recalled the civil war in order to unite youth around a common heroic memory. The civil war functioned as a “meaningful and sacred event,” providing “ever-present saints and martyrs, places of worship and a heritage to emulate.”<sup>3</sup>

The desire to codify the civil war as a foundational event began with the creation of the Komsomol’s historical commission in December 1920: Istmol, or the Commission for the Study of the History of the Russian Youth Movement.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the 1920s, Istmol collected documents and organized evenings of reminiscence and exhibitions to commemorate

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1. On the civil war in Komsomol political culture, see Anne E. Gorsuch, “NEP Be Damned! Young Militants in the 1920s and the Culture of Civil War,” *Russian Review* 56, no. 4 (October 1997): 564–67. On the development of the civil war cult, see Justus Grant Hartzok, “Children of Chapaev: The Russian Civil War Cult and the Creation of Soviet Identity, 1918–1941” (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2009).

2. A. Kurella, “Romantika v iunosheskom dvizhenii,” *Molodaia gvardiia* 7, no. 4 (1928): 168–69.

3. George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford, 1990), 6–7.

4. L. V. Badia, “Komissiiia po izucheniiu istorii VLKSM i revoliutsionnogo iunosheskogo dvizhenie (1921–1930),” in V. V. Dolgov et al., eds., *Voprosy istorii VLSKM* (Moscow, 1980), 173. Istmol’s creation followed the creation of Istpart, its party counterpart. On Istpart and the historical institutionalization of the October revolution, see Frederick Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca, 2004), chap. 4. Until its liquidation in 1931, Istmol published an estimated 400 texts on all aspects of Komsomol history. These serve as vital sources for reconstructing the cultural and political activity of young communists before and during 1917, including the Komsomol’s formation and the civil war, which lay the groundwork for the creation of a collective memory that would transcend generations. The Komsomol’s anniversary continues to be commemorated almost twenty years after the collapse of communism, testifying to the power of history and memory in maintaining a community. Varvara Petrenko, “Dve nedeli komsomol’skikh gu-

the participation in the civil war by members of the Komsomol. Istmol also solicited civil war veterans to write memoirs that would bring revolutionary heroism to life, adding color and depth to the official documents. Their publications varied in content and style, and recollections were often published with very few revisions.<sup>5</sup> The result was a heterogeneous body of literature lacking a dominant narrative for civil war memory. The recollections constituted the main literary form of civil war commemoration since the obituaries, tributes to fallen Komsomol leaders, and articles highlighting the enthusiasm of and service provided by members of the Komsomol that were published during the war.<sup>6</sup>

Komsomol civil war memoirs display an ambivalence toward the civil war. This contrasts with our general understanding of the war's memory as a heroic period in which communists sacrificed themselves wholeheartedly for the revolution. Alongside a narrative that framed the war as a "heroic epoch," veterans voiced confusion, personal loss, hardship, physical suffering, and fear in the face of death. It is precisely because of these elements that Komsomol civil war narratives can be seen as part of the important phenomenon of war remembrance at the turn of the century.<sup>7</sup> These narratives, like many of their European counterparts, are ultimately personal stories that attempt to come to terms with the personal transformations that war brought upon young soldiers and to render the

lyanii," *Gazeta.ru*, 23 October 2008, at [www.gazeta.ru/social/2008/10/23/2863267.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/social/2008/10/23/2863267.shtml) (last accessed 6 June 2012).

5. According to the Istmol worker L. M. Gurbich, "The material was collected very quickly within two or three weeks and part of it was taken from earlier publications. Everything that was used appeared as it was received without any changes or any kind of editorial corrections." L. M. Gurbich, "V Moskovskom istmole (iz vospominanii)," in V. V. Dolgov and A. A. Galagan, eds., *Pozivnye istori* (Moscow, 1982), 241.

6. It is difficult to know exactly how many recollections were published in the 1920s and early 1930s. They tended to be in small print runs and many now no longer exist. For this article, I examined dozens of veterans' recollections published between 1926 and 1933 as excerpts in newspapers and journals, in books, or as edited collections. In addition, I also consulted a number of unpublished recollections found in the depository of Istmol, Komissiiia po izucheniiu istorii iunosheskogo dvizhenie v SSSR pri TsK VLKSM, in the Komsomol archive Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 26M. The authors range from members of the Komsomol Central Committee, to local activists, former unidentified members, and even the completely anonymous. Of all the cited memoirists, I know the fate of only one, D. Khanin, who was shot in 1937. For examples of civil war obituaries, see RGASPI, f. 26, op. 1, d. 39, ll. 53, 86, 88. Many necrologies published during the war became the basis for a remembrance book of over 300 Komsomol martyrs. See Istmol, *Bezumstvu khrabykh poem my slavu* (Moscow, 1929). Other examples are included in E. D. Stasova and T. V. Bataeva, eds., *V kol'tse frontov: Molodezh' v gody grazhdanskoi voiny, sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1963). For examples of tributes to fallen Komsomol leaders, see V. Feigin, "Pamyati Gerasima Feigina," *Iunyi proletarii*, 1923, no. 1–2; Feigin, "Vechaia pamiat bortsam, pogibshim za delo proletariata," *Iunyi kommunist*, 1921, no. 6; I. Skorinko, "Aleksandr Zinovev," *Iunyi proletarii*, 1924, no. 7; Skorinko, "Vasia Alekseev," *Iunyi proletarii*, 1924, no. 6.

7. J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995); Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, 2006).

strangeness of these experiences understandable to both the readers and the soldiers themselves.<sup>8</sup>

In this article, I will examine the presentation of the war in these narratives, placing particular emphasis on the tensions surrounding young soldiers' roles as both objects and agents of war. Since heroism assumes a measure of agency, implying that a soldier has chosen to perform above and beyond expectations, many veterans felt ambivalent about the idea that their deeds had made them heroic. One veteran, D. Khanin, even wrote: "We were not heroes. Our times were heroic. Every day was filled with heroic acts. People did inconceivable and impossible feats at the time as if they were shelling sunflower seeds."<sup>9</sup> Khanin associated the war with a loss of individual agency. It was the war, and not he himself, that determined the course of his actions. While others may have perceived these actions as extraordinary, he saw them as merely another sunflower husk hitting the ground.

In this sense, these war narratives bring a new perspective to the important question about how experience, particularly traumatic experience, affects the understanding, construction, and expression of the self. In the last fifteen years, scholars have done much to expand our understanding of subject formation in modern Russia, placing particular emphasis on the ways Soviet citizens (re)presented themselves within the broader ideological and institutional strictures of the Soviet system.<sup>10</sup> These efforts to chart Soviet subjectivity, however, have largely focused on Soviet citizens' valorization of the self through their own self-(re)presentation as political subjects. By struggling to narrate themselves through a Soviet vernacular, scholars argue, citizens strove to realize an "aligned life" that "promised authenticity and intense meaning."<sup>11</sup> They could, at the very least, supposedly eke out a stable, and even autonomous, life in unstable times through the pragmatic subterfuge, performance, and accommodation of the fluid categories that the Soviet system imposed upon them. In such arrangements, the modern subject emerges as highly rational, psychologically unified, and willfully conscious of its self within a sociopolitical location.

The self narrated by Komsomol civil war veterans, by contrast, was less confident in its will and more fragile in its constitution and much more a

8. Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, Eng., 1979), 12–17. On the effects of war on children, see James Marten, ed., *Children and War: A Historical Anthology* (New York, 2002).

9. D. Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie* (Moscow, 1930), 34.

10. For an excellent overview of the self and subjectivity in Soviet studies, see Choi Chatterjee and Karen Petrone, "Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Soviet Case in Historical Perspective," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 967–86. Foundational texts for "Soviet subjectivity" and the self include Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, "Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin's 'Magnetic Mountain' and the State of Soviet Historical Studies," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44, no. 3 (1996): 456–63; Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley, 1999); Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, 2000); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006). For a critical look at the subject as a category of analysis, see Eric Naiman, "On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars Who Make Them," *Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (July 2001): 307–15.

11. Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, 13.

by-product of fate than a craftsman of it. It is a self that could be understood only in a constant state of shattering; a self torn asunder by the war and then reformed on the battlefield into an instinctual being, imprisoned by emotions, senses, nerves, and muscles. In a way, these narratives align with historians' efforts to illuminate the "darker side" of the self in Russian proletarian writing.<sup>12</sup> Considerations of this darker self typically emphasize the role of suffering, estrangement, hopelessness, powerlessness, dislocation, and near-death experience in shaping an individual's sense of self. Although these darker sources are often contradicted by aspirations to agency, their lingering presence nevertheless erects a barrier, disrupting any attempt to narrate a fully aligned life. As this article will show, veterans' attempts to align their experiences within the grander tropes of Soviet discourse were similarly overshadowed by some compulsion to describe the war's terrible tragedies.

Experiencing violence was central to the darker side of the Komsomol civil war veteran. As Joshua Sanborn has noted, performing violence was necessary for inclusion in the nation, but the promotion of brutality was a slippery slope, for destructive violence tended to outstrip its productive virtue. Indeed, as Sanborn shows, the omnipresence of violence during World War I and the civil war was so "virulent" that it "had become a national epidemic."<sup>13</sup> The acceptance of brutality as constitutive of Russian life across the revolutionary divide demands investigation into the impact of violence and trauma upon the articulation of the self.<sup>14</sup> One of the primary issues addressed here is how the experience of violence rendered the pre-violent self unrecoverably lost. But the vicissitudes of violence go deeper than foreclosing on temporal reconciliation. In the Komsomol civil war veterans' processes of recollection and self-articulation, we can not only observe violence as performative but also chart the ways its rhythms seared onto the body itself through "fleeting images, the percussion of

12. Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910–1925* (Ithaca, 2002), 4. For investigations on the nature of proletarian writing in the 1920s, see Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley, 1990); Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton, 1997); Eliot Borenstein, *Men without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929* (Durham, 2000).

13. Joshua A. Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905–1925* (DeKalb, 2003), 176.

14. *Ibid.*, 163–200. Sanborn rightly declared that "violence has remained surprisingly unproblematic and consequently undertheorized within the historiography of modern Russia" (166). In addition to Sanborn's important contribution, there have been a few attempts to think about the role of violence and its lingering traumas in the Russian context. See, for example, Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory* (Bloomington, 2011), 127–64; Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Holquist, "Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence, 1905–21," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 627–52; Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917–1922* (Princeton, 2002); Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, 2000), 71–92. For a multidisciplinary investigation into the relationship between violence and subjectivity, see Veena Das et al., eds., *Violence and Subjectivity* (Berkeley, 2000). On the psychological impact of war on youth in particular, see Brian K. Barber, ed., *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence* (Oxford, 2009).

blows, sounds, and movements of the body.”<sup>15</sup> It is, after all, ultimately the body that serves as the depository for experience and, by extension, for the veterans’ very senses of self. I will chart three distinct moments of war experience that appear throughout the memoirs: the initial disorientation and dislocation caused by the outbreak of revolution and war, the experience of the first battle, and the long-term transformative effect of war experiences upon the body itself.

### Tempestuous Memories

The Russian revolution and civil war marked the culmination of a seven-year period in which Russia seemed, in the words of Leopold Haimson, a “society out of joint.” The civil war in particular exacerbated the existing pressures on Russian society, drawing hundreds of thousands into fierce battle, straining families, splitting communities, depopulating cities, spreading crime, disease, and hunger, scattering refugees, and killing millions across the country.<sup>16</sup> These tectonic shifts in the Russian social fabric had myriad destabilizing effects on the way that individuals regarded themselves and their places in society.<sup>17</sup> Some Komsomol civil war veterans remembered the revolution and the civil war as euphoric and liberating, full of opportunities to exact revenge for the many years of oppression or to participate in building a more just order. Their narratives present a stark break between the self rendered obsolete by the revolution and civil war and the future self full of potential. A. Malovechkin, a Komsomol partisan in Khabarovsk, for example, described the revolution as a “miracle” that produced a sharp break between his past and present selves. “One thing was certainly clear: we could no longer live as before,” he recalled. “Yesterday we were slaves, today we are the bosses.” This certainty, he claimed, pulled him like “a young tree to the sun,” leading him into political work and eventually to the Komsomol.<sup>18</sup>

What was a “miracle” for Malovechkin, however, was remembered by other veterans as the beginning of a chaotic world that consigned young soldiers to a life of perpetual disruption. These memoirists tended to represent the times with more tumultuous imagery: a storm or a boat on unruly seas. A. Viatich, for example, recalled the “whirlwind of struggles” that threw him and his comrades “in all directions” as they were moved

15. Roberta Culberston, “Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Re-counting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self,” *New Literary History* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 174.

16. Leopold H. Haimson, “Civil War and the Problem of Social Identities in Early Twentieth-Century Russia,” and Sheila Fitzpatrick, “New Perspectives on the Civil War,” both in Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History* (Bloomington, 1989), 24–25 and 3–23. On the civil war as a continuum of violence in Russia, see Holquist, “Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism?”

17. For the destabilizing effects of the civil war on the community in Saratov and on the narratives of the self that resulted, see Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War*, chaps. 6 and 8.

18. A. Malovechkin, *Bolshevistskoi tropoi: Vospominaniia starogo komsomoltsa* (Khabarovsk, 1933), 4.

from front to front.<sup>19</sup> Nikolai Lunev, whose recollections were written after his emigration to the west in the 1940s, described his generation as “trying to find a place in the stormy events of those years.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in recounting the Tripole massacre, Il’ia Novskii asked his readers: “Were you at sea during the storm?” and then went on to vividly describe the citizens of Russia as if trapped on a wayward ship:

The wind howled in the sails, gigantic waves flooded over the deck, tearing and cracking the ropes, and every new wave was about to become a grave, a sepulchral hill under which tens of hundreds of people [would be buried]. The passengers thrashed and cried; they could only appeal to heaven for salvation. They looked at the black fog with fear and at night they froze with horror. . . . What winds blew in the country in October 1919; what storms raged in those remarkable years that swept us up?! Whose head did not twirl and whose heart did not hammer with fear and despair!<sup>21</sup>

Novskii’s symbolic depiction of the civil war is striking, not only in its gothic horror, but also for its testament to the fragility of the self when faced with a disruption of the familiar by the unpredictable and unknown. Indeed, the destructive power of war—symbolized in these winds and waves—did batter the people of Russia, bandying them back and forth while tearing the country’s social fabric—the ship, its deck, and its ropes—to pieces. Amid this confusion, a dense dark fog obscured any ability to see the war’s end and provoked fears about the uncertain future. The bright socialist ideal, which should have guided people out of the maelstrom, was replaced with a desperate appeal to the gods for salvation.

Despite these destructive forces, the tumultuous revolutionary era provided a basis for the construction of new identities.<sup>22</sup> For Komsomol adherents, however, the shape of these new political subjectivities was not initially clear, and thus in many ways perpetuated the sense of dislocation they had already been experiencing. Although the veteran memoirists eventually joined the Bolshevik cause, the sudden surge of political activity around them induced feelings of vertigo. They often portrayed their politicization as a journey filled with caution, missteps, dips, and turns.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, they attributed their eventual decision to join the Komsomol or the Red Army to personal tastes, emotions, friendships, social networks, or workplaces, and not to any kind of overt epiphanies.<sup>24</sup> Malovechkin, for example, remembered waffling “from one extreme to the other” as he

19. RGASPI, f. 26M, op. 1, d. 56, l. 125.

20. Nikolai Lunev, “Blind Faith in a Bright Future,” in Nikolai K. Novak-Deker, ed., *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories* (Munich, 1959), 25.

21. Il’ia Novskii, *Tripolskaia tragediia* (Moscow, 1928), 13. The Tripole Massacre occurred on 15 June 1919 when an estimated 80 members of the Komsomol were killed by Greens outside the town of Tripole in Ukraine.

22. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War*, chap. 8.

23. Some historians have read these winding roads to Bolshevism as a narrative of political maturation. It is important, however, to emphasize these as memories of confusion because these periods of disorientation influenced their understandings of the revolution and their place in it.

24. Corney, *Telling October*, 84.

negotiated the revolutionary left in Khabarovsk. "I woke up one morning and I was for the Bolsheviks, and then for the SRs, and then inclined toward the anarchists, and then back again. Sometimes it was based on who spoke better." He eventually attached himself to the Bolshevik slogans that called for an end to World War I, encouraged youth activism, and promised to lower the voting age to eighteen.<sup>25</sup> I. Savin recalled that he "poorly understood" the politics around him and found the differences between political parties "completely blurry."<sup>26</sup> He, too, eventually joined a circle of worker youth, but largely at his friends' behest. F. Zuikov, surprisingly, pointed to Lev Trotskii as the source that set him on the political straight and narrow, a detail that is in itself unusual for a memoir published amid the anti-Trotskyist pressures of 1927. In early 1919, Zuikov could not figure out "how to make sense" of all the "ridiculous rumors and fairy tales" circulating at his local pub. When he read Trotskii's speech from the Second Komsomol Congress, however, Zuikov found the sense of direction he was seeking. Trotskii "ignited a fighting flame in his heart" and "every word dug into his head like a nail." In the end, Trotskii's romantic fantasy of heroic death attracted Zuikov. "You can only die a brave and courageous death once," he concluded.<sup>27</sup>

The shape of political subjectivities depended not only on the contingencies of personal relations but also on the broader centripetal forces of the war.<sup>28</sup> Veterans often recalled the polarizing effects of the war, which reduced everyday relations to an allegiance with either the "Reds" or the "Whites." This political and social manichaeism was a common trope in official accounts of the revolution.<sup>29</sup> When it came to the civil war, however, veterans always couched this polarization in the immediate local violence raging around them. Malovechkin remembered how the eruption of violence in Khabarovsk split the town's inhabitants into two opposing camps. "There was no middle. You went here or there . . . I don't know who could have stood idle at the time. One had to fight."<sup>30</sup> N. Borodin, who was fourteen at the outbreak of war, attributed a similar polarization in his native town of Kamensk to the local governing "principle of two eyes for an eye and two teeth for a tooth." Violence reduced all identities in his community "into those who sympathized with the Reds, [those who

25. Malovechkin, *Bolshevistskoi tropoi*, 5. A. Andreev described all the political speeches: "Everyone's tongues twirled—Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, SRs, Kadets, and others. As life went on and the days got noisier and bubbled over like a powerful river in a flood." RGASPI, f. 26M, op. 1, d. 56, l. 38.

26. M. Afonin and A. Iurtsev, eds., *Na front i na fronte: Sbornik vospominanii* (Moscow, 1927), 2.

27. *Ibid.*, 70–71. On the rejection of Trotskii in the Komsomol, see Anne E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington, 2000), 85–86; Ralph Talcott Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of the Congresses of the Komsomol, 1918–1954* (New York, 1959), 113–17.

28. Peter Holquist describes the sublimation of people's political behavior during the civil war as a result of the "social theory of representation" where "political movements cast themselves as the embodiment of particular social groups and imposed their own projects onto people's often very messy political behavior." Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution*, 143–57. I would add that violence played a vital role in this process.

29. Corney, *Telling October*, 85.

30. Malovechkin, *Bolshevistskoi tropoi*, 19–20.

agreed] with the Whites and those who were ‘neutrals.’” Ultimately, however, even the neutrals could not remain nonpartisan. “They always called one of the fighting parties ‘ours,’” Borodin explained. “Indeed it was impossible to be neutral, because each family had relatives and friends, who were fighting on one or the other side.” Borodin even depicted his grade school as a microcosm of the country and detailed its collapse into a bacchanalia of death.

The pupils of our school were also split into White, Red and neutral just as their elders were at home. . . . The Reds shot our headmaster Bogavsky dead, because he was a White. The Whites hanged the teacher Gorobtsov, because he was a Red. The Reds shot my schoolmate Obukov and his six-year-old sister, because they sympathized with the Whites. The Whites shot the boy Soloviev and his old mother, because they sympathized with the Reds. Our school no longer existed. The teachers and pupils were either fighting or helping one or the other side, and many of them were killed.<sup>31</sup>

As Borodin’s description suggests, politics superseded all other forms of social identity. The previous relations in Borodin’s school, in which individuals interacted with each other as students and teachers, were reduced to the division of “Red” and “White.” Many veterans associated these kinds of political bifurcations with the further dehumanization of everyday life. Malovechkin also recalled when “a fight to the death flared up.” People were burned alive in their villages and their corpses lined the streets. It was this political ferocity that made, in his words, “human life worthless.”<sup>32</sup>

Another event that veterans remembered as a disruption to their lives was the departure for the front. In Komsomol political culture, volunteering for the front was the ultimate act of political consciousness and sacrifice. At the same time, however, memories of leaving for the front were largely bittersweet. Alongside their enthusiasm, joviality, and camaraderie, the veterans recalled sharp, guilt-ridden confrontations with parents and painful goodbyes to friends as they boarded trains to unknown, and usually undefined, destinations. These bittersweet memories of joy and sorrow suggest a liminal subjective location: a space between an old self ensconced in family and friends and a new life yet to be determined on the battlefield. The power of this moment was further punctuated by the understanding that they might never return. “They knew, down to the last one, they knew that few would return to their fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, to their native Komsomol club. They knew that they would not reap the harvest of victory,” Novskii recalled. Their only hope was that if they fell in battle, “drops of their blood would redden the banners of victory.”<sup>33</sup>

This desire for a purposeful sacrifice gave young soldiers the courage to forsake their families and leave for the front. M. Gavrilin, for example, volunteered for a grain requisitioning detachment to save the Soviet Republic from famine. Before shipping off to Orenburg, however, Gavrilin

31. N. M. Borodin, *One Man in His Time* (New York, 1955), 17–18.

32. Malovechkin, *Bolshevistskoi tropoi*, 22.

33. Novskii, *Tripolskaia tragediia*, 16.

was left with the difficult task of telling his mother of his decision. Gavrilin was the only breadwinner in a family of seven and “not everything was happy at home. My mother was sick. So as not to burden her I decided not to say anything,” he recalled. When his mother asked why he was packing a bag, however, he “immediately lost courage” and instead of telling her the truth, told her he that was going to the bathhouse. “Then what are the boots for?” she inquired. Gavrilin eventually confessed that he was joining a grain detachment and his mother protested. “What, are you crazy?!” she exclaimed. “And what about your family?” Despite her objections, Gavrilin remained determined and tore himself from her desperate grasp.<sup>34</sup> N. Pelevin said nothing to his mother about volunteering to the front. When she asked if he was returning soon, he replied, “Probably late. I don’t know. I might stay overnight and not even come home. There’s a lot of work to do.” As he left, he even turned his back to her, pulling down his cap so as to “not see my mother’s face anymore.”<sup>35</sup> Zuikov described his departure from his mother by saying: “If you, reader, need to leave home for a long time, you know how bad you feel from [your] parents’ send-off. They usually ruin the mood. It’s better to go alone. But this time I could not deny my mother escorting me. We went in silence. The tedious sprinkle of rain ruined the mood. . . . She needed to get back as soon as possible. I didn’t want any tears—I don’t like them. And my heart was wrenching. . . . What could I say to her? . . . I remember only managing to say, ‘Mom, you know your son knows what to do. Farewell!’”<sup>36</sup>

These confrontations with family were important in the veterans’ recollections of the war not only because of the pain they caused but also because they played a role in the larger “ceremonial process [that] separates those who go to war from those who remain at home.”<sup>37</sup> This ceremony symbolized a transition from the self of home to the self of war. This passage between selves was further accentuated in descriptions of the physical act of boarding the train. A train station is itself a liminal space, perfect for embodying the mixed emotions of departure. In some accounts, veterans remembered a celebratory mood that swept the station, filling it with songs, music, jokes, laughter, curses, and cries of “Hurrah!” This excitement was so contagious, Gavrilin recalled, that there was not a single “gloomy, bored person.” Alongside this celebratory mood, however, there were also signs of sorrow, dread, and desperation. R. Vasil’eva recalled hearing the sounds of “wailing” women and “crying” children as she accompanied her friend Stepan to the train station. She remembered that she and her friend Glasha cried as they waved to Stepan. They left the station with “heavy hearts,” wondering in that moment of despair, “when will this damned war end! If only someone would win already.”<sup>38</sup> Some

34. M. Afonin and A. Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni: Ocherki i vospominaniia komsomol'tsevuchastnikov Grazhdanskoi voiny* (Moscow, 1929), 55.

35. Afonin and Iurtsev, eds., *Na front i na fronte*, 42.

36. *Ibid.*, 74.

37. Leed, *No Man’s Land*, 16.

38. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 56. R. Vasil’eva, *Pervyi komsomolki* (Moscow, 1932), 35. A. Andreev also noted the tears of the parents as their sons left for the front. RGASPI, f. 26M, op. 1, d. 56, l. 40.

veterans even compared these eerie farewell ceremonies with funeral processions, for the slow movements of the departing train were usually accompanied by strains of the “International” and the waving of hands or white handkerchiefs, bidding a final farewell. E. Pirtin noted that every volunteer at his farewell ceremony received a new pouch of tobacco from a Komsomolka as a gift “in remembrance.” He and his fellow Komsomol members laughed and joked, as if the deeper meaning of the fresh tobacco had failed to set in. Only when a truck arrived to take them to the train station, he reported, did their “faces get serious” and lose “their previous indifference.”<sup>39</sup> A. Ziuzin’s recollection had a more personal touch. He recalled how his old life faded away when his regiment pulled out of the train station. “Everything was [moving] further and further away. . . . Posters were still flickering, hats were waving us goodbye. . . . My girlfriend Niura’s red tie faded into a black dot.”<sup>40</sup> For him, the fading image of Niura represented a loss of youthful folly and young love.

### Baptisms by Fire

Paul Fussell argues that every war is ironic because “every war is worse than expected.”<sup>41</sup> The Russian civil war was ironic because, armed with the assuredness of their new political identities, young communists desired great sacrifices and believed that they would become red knights and single-handedly save the Soviet Republic. They imagined that the front was the place where their fantasies could be realized. As B. Artamanov described it: “It is criminal to sit in one place when they tell you about the extreme danger and difficult conditions at the front, when you are no more than seventeen years old and a Bolshevik party card is in your pocket and [you’ve been] baptized in the October battles. *There* is where the question of the Republic’s existence is being decided. *There* is where guys are fighting the enemy, where all thoughts are directed.”<sup>42</sup> Artamanov’s emphasis on “there” as the place where the revolution would be decided is a testament to the fantasies that young soldiers brought with them to war. Yet after their first taste of battle, their sacrifices were rendered moot as they were transformed by the realities of war into new, more instinctual creatures, devoid of agency.

Ziuzin recalled that he arrived at the front with a dream that battle would be something adventurous and heroic. He imagined capturing Polish prisoners “with [his] bare hands” and, in an act of class justice, “freeing the soldiers while lopping the heads off the officers.” Ziuzin’s first firefight, his so-called baptism by fire, dashed such fantasies. Death rained down on his platoon without warning. The bursts of fire from the enemy’s Maxim machine guns, the thunder of the cannonades, and thousands of enemy voices made him face “our ineptitude and inexperience. We fired indiscriminately, without purpose, banging our heads with our

39. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 124.

40. *Ibid.*, 6.

41. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1975), 7.

42. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 108. Emphasis added.

own rifles.”<sup>43</sup> Like Ziuzin, many veterans described their first battle as a “baptism by fire” (*kreshchenia ognem*). Though it may be a convention, this turn of phrase should not be dismissed as literary dalliance. In Komsomol civil war memoirs, the “baptism by fire” marked a pivotal moment in the transformation of self on the battlefield. With bullets whizzing past their heads, the first sight of the enemy, and the confusion of battle, veterans became detached from their past lives. A. Balashov, for example, contrasted his impending “fighting baptism” with the dreams of his idyllic childhood: “You go [into battle], but every now and again your thoughts are carried away to your happy childhood in the distant past. You dream of the harvest, rye fields, and homemade sour bread.” Balashov’s lapse into memories of his halcyon days may be seen as part of his process of saying farewell to an increasingly distant and unrecoverable life. This idyllic past, for Balashov, stood in stark contrast to the experience of patrolling forests outside the village of Uni in Viatka province. “You attentively follow every step and vigilantly protect the space between you and your neighbor,” he recalled, describing the moments before a confrontation with the enemy.<sup>44</sup>

In these “baptisms by fire,” the imminent presence of death functioned as the baptismal waters. According to their recollections, most members of the Komsomol had little sense of their own mortality before battle. When Ziuzin and his comrades crouched on the banks of the Berezina River observing the enemy, for example, “it seemed inconceivable that any of us could be killed.”<sup>45</sup> Balashov remembered finally realizing that death was near when orderlies approached each soldier before the first battle to exchange addresses “in case they were killed.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, death did not fully sink in until the battle was over. Artamanov remembered a “somber mood” among his comrades after the end of battle, a mood relieved only by laughter at his friend Piskunov’s quip: “My cap doesn’t have a hole in it, so I guess my head didn’t get hit.” For Savin, however, dark humor was the farthest thing from his mind after a night shelling Denikin’s forces in Krasnodar. As the sun pierced the dissipating smoke over the city, he spotted a cemetery on a hill in the distance. “They buried more than a few that day,” he thought to himself.<sup>47</sup>

Veterans presented this “baptism by fire” as the production of a self that was more focused and decisive. After the initial shocks of battle wore off, young soldiers became better oriented to their new environment. I. Afanas’ev, for example, contrasted his panic during his first battle with subsequent firefights where he could be more present in the moment. “During my ‘baptism by fire’—my first time,” he recalled, “I felt insignificant.” At that battle, he explained, fear had overtaken him and he lost the

43. *Ibid.*, 7.

44. A. Balashov, *Otriad v ogne: Istoricheskii ocherk o komsomolskom otriade epokhi grazhdanskoi voiny* (Moscow, 1931), 21.

45. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 6.

46. Balashov, *Otriad v ogne*, 21.

47. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 112; Afonin and Iurtsev, eds., *Na front i na fronte*, 20.

ability to act consciously. “Your survival instinct kicks in. You lose yourself under the whizzing bullets, searching somewhere to hide your head, forgetting that you don’t have eyes in the back of it and you can barely see where to shoot.” In subsequent battles, however, he became accustomed to this frenzy. “After a while,” he wrote, “you feel at home and get used to it, of course.”<sup>48</sup> N. Rubinshtein went so far as to describe battles as “repetitive,” noting that his initial debilitating emotions had been replaced with a newfound focus. “I was used to fire and there was no time to think about feelings. All the attention was ‘on the moment’—Will we be attacked? When and from where?” For him, the hail of bullets and artillery became so banal that it seemed part of the daily routine. “When the firing stopped, we all ate, sopping bread in butter and powdered sugar.”<sup>49</sup>

Life at the front also required veterans to acclimate themselves to the proximity to dirt, disease, corpses, and other symbols of the unclean. Veterans recalled mutilated corpses left to rot in streets, fields, and forests, the smell of bloody pus from the wounds of maimed soldiers in Red Cross hospitals, and other horrors of the front.<sup>50</sup> The desire to find some relief from the filth was so prevalent in Pirtin’s unit that when they questioned friendly locals in Kirgizia, in addition to the usual formalities (“is there a Komsomol, what are the customs of the local population, etc.,”) he remembered asking “whether there was a bathhouse.”<sup>51</sup> Others, like P. Karinov, who was stricken twice with typhus, recalled the futility in preventing frequent visits from the “unwanted guest” that accompanied lice infestation.<sup>52</sup> For most, baths were few and far between. Throughout the war, Afanas’ev recalled, “We never bathed or washed our underwear or went to the village bathhouses.” Eventually, he and his comrades developed a morbid sense of humor to deal with the lice, referring to them as enemies “no better than the Poles. . . . It was not surprising that there was a slogan at the time: Either the lice defeat socialism or socialism defeats the lice,” he wrote. “We often lit a large bonfire and slowly roasted our underwear over the fire. The victims [*zhertvy*] of our inquisition [*inkvizitsii*] fell into the fire, making popping sounds.”<sup>53</sup>

Intimacy with the unclean, however, was hardly the providence of soldiers; such hardships were pervasive throughout the population during the civil war. Still, recollections of the unclean remained an enduring memory among veterans in particular. It was this particular hardship, after all, that formed a sense of shared experience at the front. “We were a small circle then,” wrote a certain Grigorii Abramovich in 1926. “Any minute we could be murdered by Savinkotskii agents, White bandits, or others, and powerlessness, hatred, philistinism, and typhus raged around

48. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 20.

49. Afonin and Iurtsev, eds., *Na front i na fronte*, 67.

50. Vasil’eva, *Pervyi komsomolki*, 106–13; Stasova and Bataeva, eds., *V kol'tse frontov*, 63; Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 86; A. Dorokhov, *V shkole v revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1931), 28.

51. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 127.

52. *Ibid.*, 147.

53. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

us; we had lice, we were hungry, but all of this strengthened our connection as one family.”<sup>54</sup> The bonding rituals of camp life are prevalent throughout the memoirs. Pelevin recalled that after a battle, he and his fellow youths would gather “like bees in a beehive” and pass the night trying to outdo each other with tales of “comedic and tragic luck” colored with “bombastic phrases” and “vulgar expressions.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Afanas’ev described his time bunched in armored train cars as buzzing with “lively discussions . . . memories of the front; faraway Moscow; girls and fleeting romances in train stations; cooked-up anecdotes that prompted explosions in laughter; jokes; sharp, humorous sayings interspersed throughout that added to the ardor of the ‘orator.’”<sup>56</sup>

Still, memories of this happy “family,” bound by war, were not enough to wash away the feelings of loneliness and melancholy at the front. Alongside his recollections of the buzzing train, Afanas’ev also recalled the effect of Siberia’s “somber and gloomy weather,” its “dark tundra,” “dark mountains,” and “short days and nights—long ponderous nights” on a soldier’s disposition. “No diversity of color or variety whatsoever that could bring some pleasure for a while,” he recalled, “everything is uniformly somber and dark.” “Melancholy [*toska*] unwittingly weighs on the soul,” he continued, “you desire to remain alone, withdraw from your surroundings and think, remember, and dream of the old days.”<sup>57</sup>

Some veterans, therefore, found no solace in the festivity of comradeship, emphasizing in their recollections the necessity of becoming emotionally numb to survive the front. Khanin recalled that he “needed to suspend opinion, smother emotion, and dress himself in armor in those harsh days.” Survival required him to give up a piece of his past life in exchange. The front “cut the unruly cowlicks” off his head and “with them went [his] boyhood.”<sup>58</sup> Vasil’eva also recounted that the “severities of military life” hardened her and her comrades. “We, Komsomolki, stopped smiling,” she recalled. Thoughts of home—and thus of their former selves—evaporated along with the smiles, so that even encounters with old friends aroused only a brief gesture of recognition. “No one thought about returning to Piter. Often we would meet old comrades from the Youth League. We gladly nodded our heads and moved on.”<sup>59</sup>

Veterans described a sense of continual dislocation on the journey from home to the baptismal waters of battle. The civil war battered young soldiers like a storm, forcing new, but no less confusing, subjectivities upon them. Their former lives faded when they left family and friends to join the front, and indelible memories of war traumas, like the “baptisms by fire,” rendered them fully unrecoverable. The very word *baptism* after

54. Tsentral’nyi arkhiv obshchestvenno-politicheskoi istorii Moskvy, Moskovskii komitet VLKSM, f. 634, op. 1, d. 98, l. 4.

55. Afonin and Iurtsev, eds., *Na front i na fronte*, 50.

56. *Ibid.*, 133.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie*, 22.

59. R. Vasil’eva, “Komsomolki boevykh otriyadov,” *Molodezh’ v revoliutsii* 1, no. 1 (1931): 91.

all, supports Samuel Hynes's contention that war memoirs fall within the genre of "conversion literature."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, members of the Komsomol entered battle as one person and exited as another. Even their fantasies of agency were converted, permeated with tensions from the strains of battle. On the one hand, they still dreamed of becoming a historical force to punish the enemy, to sacrifice themselves in a heroic death. But baptism had rendered them small and insignificant; they jumped for cover instinctually and fired haphazardly. In acclimating to the front, they were reduced to their survival instincts.

### The Sensory Imprisonment of Memory

Scholars of war literature have noted that soldiers often retreat into irrational and mythic language as a way to cope with the loss of control over their individual fate in the face of modern warfare.<sup>61</sup> But the extremities of war can bring out more than just flights into cosmologies of the premodern. War challenges the very existence of a rational self; the pressures of survival reduce a soldier to a more base, instinctual, and corporeal man. War is ultimately an experience of wild reaction and response, endurance, and strain, which subordinates the logic of the mind to the illogic of the emotions and the body. This subordination can be glimpsed in the Komsomol veterans' recollections of the sound, smell, touch, and sight of the war and their descriptions of the impact these sensations had on their bodies. These recollections speak of a self imprisoned by the senses and their bodily effects. Although necessary for survival, heightened senses ultimately taxed these soldiers' bodies, driving them to fantasize about death.

Even their ability to orient themselves was compromised, hampered by the constant crouching on the ground, the long periods of silence and stillness, the plumes of smoke, the dust kicked up from battle, the darkness of night, and the intermittent sleep. According to Eric Leed, a soldier compensates for his disorientation by fine-tuning his other senses.<sup>62</sup> A sensitivity to sound, in particular, is often vital to a soldier's survival. Silence grinds his nerves, while its sudden break could indicate imminent danger. In their recollections, civil war veterans often referred to the quiet of the forest or the night. Their efforts to keep silent, even in thick grass, provoked accidents and endangered many. Once, while he and his comrades silently waited to ambush the enemy, Khanin recalled, "The dry grass tickled my nose. . . . I moved quietly, carefully, like a thief in the night. And suddenly something hard and prickly poked my eye producing an unexpected tear. My head jerked and swayed like a ridiculous idiot, strongly banging into my neighbor's. 'Goddamn it' [*Tvoiu mat'*], he cursed with a murmur. 'Can't you lie quiet?'" Shushes went down the line

60. Samuel Lynn Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York, 1997), 5.

61. Leed, *No Man's Land*, 126–30; Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, chap. 4.

62. Leed, *No Man's Land*, 126.

as Khanin buried his face in the dirt trying not to sneeze. Later, however, his senses were sharpened as he became aware of the enemy approaching. He recalled “smelling the enemy” with every rustle of the grass. “I anxiously squeezed my large heavy rifle more than once. My head extended, my ears throbbed and my mouth was dry as I waited to shoot when a person appeared.”<sup>63</sup>

Silence heightened a soldier’s anticipation, coiled his muscles, and readied him for action. Sudden eruptions of sound jolted through his body, as if the vibrations themselves were rattling his insides, compelling his muscles to spring forth. Using words like *suddenly* (*vdrug*), memoirists captured the shock they felt when enemy fire punctured the night’s silence. Pelevin’s battle narrative, for example, is saturated with the alternating cacophony of sounds and their ensuing physical effects. The “ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta” of machine gun fire filled the air, “grew unexpectedly silent” only to be “suddenly disturbed by the deafening boom [*gul*] of the artillery.” Then, artillery explosions followed one another “Boom! Boom! Boom!” This combination of gunfire and exploding shells reminded Pelevin of “a belfry in which all the large and small bells ring simultaneously.” The barrage of noise from the artillery and whizzing bullets reverberated in him, creating a series of uncontrollable physical reactions. He “instinctively ducked [his] head.” His heart began beating so loudly that “at times it seemed as if it could drown out the surrounding noise: the screeching bullets, the noise of rain, and the exploding shells.” He felt his “body shrink as if it was trying to grow smaller and tougher, impervious to the enemy’s bullets and bayonets.” His steps quickened. His hands clenched the rifle tighter. His life “vanished and reappeared” before his eyes in “fragments of thoughts, phrases, and conversations.” He felt “a nervous shiver [*nerвнаia drozh'*] similar to touching a hot electrical wire,” which “penetrated [his] body and contracted [his] muscles,” compelling him to push forward.<sup>64</sup> Pelevin did not ascribe any agency to himself. It seems that his mind occupied no presence on the battlefield, as if the sonic barrage of battle took control of his body, propelling his muscles into motion.

While Pelevin’s description focused primarily on sound, others addressed sight and touch. S. Shchogolev’s recollection suggests that the vividness of the battle’s sights, sounds, and feelings had left indelible scars on his memory. His opening paragraph reads:

The loud reverberation of cannons and the dry popping of rifles filled the air, making the sweltering heat all the more fiery. Bursts [from the cannons] swooped up dust and made the heat intolerable. Along the wide road to Warsaw, a human mass rose from the dust and flowed in an endless stream like lava from an exploding volcano. The artillery cannons rattled nosily past. Their wheels banged loudly on the ground and the long muzzle of the cannon shook like an elephant’s trunk. Cavaliers with tipped caps cocked on their heads galloped past on frothy, sodden white horses with clanking horseshoes. Red Army soldiers went in

63. Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie*, 23, 25.

64. Afonin and Iurtsev, eds., *Na front i na fronte*, 46–48.

all directions with their heads down. Covered with dust, they huddled around each other as they dashed from one side to the other, ignoring the cavalry and artillery. The wounded dragged themselves to the ready. Afraid of being left behind, they fearfully took to the defensive, shielding their bandaged stumps blackened with blood and dust. Hundreds of heads turned back with every artillery shell, stunned for a moment, they bunched together and then hastily thrust forward.<sup>65</sup>

Shchgolev's vibrant passage exemplifies the manner in which many civil war narratives were fueled by the senses. Shchgolev's memories were so embroidered with the sounds, images, and feelings that overwhelmed him, that they could not be situated in space and time. Indeed, Shchgolev provided no location or date for this battle. It is even unclear who fired the artillery. Aside from a brief mention of Red Army soldiers zigzagging in all directions, the stream of human mass, the cavalry, and the wounded are never attributed to a particular side. There is no "us against them," no Reds and Whites, no revolution and counterrevolution, no proletarians and bourgeoisie. The battle had no discernible meaning, just an existential chaos.

The experiences of battle were intertwined with many other bodily sensations at the front. Veterans recalled short encampments, long drudges through the snow encumbered by heavy equipment, cold sleepless nights, and long periods of hunger. Many actually considered these experiences to be testaments to their suffering. Afanas'ev recalled that though he and his comrades were "exhausted by sleepless and starved nights," their shared sense of suffering allowed their "spirit and morale" to remain high.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, the war's physical trials weighed on them. I. Uvarov recalled that the mood of his unit was "foul" and that their eyes were "swollen and reddened" after several hungry and sleepless nights of walking.<sup>67</sup> Khanin reported that prolonged hunger had driven some to desert the army: "They were patient the first week. But on the tenth day hunger dampened their consciousness." Some soldiers began to encourage the others to "rip their five-pointed stars off their caps." Most soldiers did not listen, at first, "but on the twelfth day, when it became unbearable to look at moldy biscuits, several Red Army soldiers trampled on their red stars."<sup>68</sup>

While hunger pushed soldiers to the brink, sleeplessness put them in danger. G. Ryvkin wrote of one incident when, after a long reconnaissance, he and his comrades decided to camp near a village to recharge for the night. In retrospect, Ryvkin remembered feeling uneasy with the decision. The village's "profound peacefulness" struck him as odd, particularly when a group of village girls "disturbed the calmness" with "fortune-telling" chants, all foretelling danger. Ryvkin was so concerned with sleep after another "exhausting day and cold night," that even the idea of stretching out over thatch "swarming with bedbugs and lice" seemed a relief. He

65. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 44.

66. *Ibid.*, 23.

67. Afonin and Iurtsev, eds., *Na front i na fronte*, 121.

68. Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie*, 23–24.

did not “sweetly fall asleep,” however. The vermin made him itch incessantly. He tossed and turned. “After half an hour of tossing and turning, I reluctantly opened my eyes. Looking out the window I saw someone with a suspicious shaggy hat. I jumped up, tore toward the window, and [saw] that a fire was burning and I could hear people running.” Ryvkin quickly grabbed his rifle and began firing to alert the rest of his regiment, who ran after the saboteurs, breaking down the walls of the hut they had hidden in. “The shooting,” Ryvkin remembered, “awoke the entire village.”<sup>69</sup>

Exhaustion could push young soldiers to the point where captivity and even death seemed preferable. When Afanas’ev was told that he and his regiment were surrounded, he rejoiced, immediately associating captivity with sleep. “It was strange. The word *prisoner* was directly connected to sleep and rest,” he recalled. During his long march to a Polish prisoner-of-war camp, Afanas’ev repeatedly thought of this imminent sleep, and when two Polish soldiers beat him on the head and back, he and his comrades “dragged themselves on the naked ground and fell asleep.” For now, he wrote, “sleep was in hand.”<sup>70</sup>

Although veterans hoped that this sleep would set them free, it turned out to be a gateway to further suffering. Afanas’ev’s sleep was repeatedly delayed by his captors, who removed whatever comforts he possessed: warm clothes, heavy coat, and boots. Left with a thin overcoat, he was forced to walk back and forth in order to keep warm. Savin’s captors gave him and his friend Vaska two hours of sleep before awakening them. A Polish officer hit the sleeping Vaska on the back of his legs, shouting “get up you . . . sonofabitch [*mat’ tvoiu v grob*].” Upon awakening, they were led to an interrogation where, Savin remembered, “we were beaten because we were volunteers and beaten because we were Reds. They beat us for silence. For protesting. They beat us for being communists. For being Jews. They beat us for whatever entered their head.”<sup>71</sup> Savin and Vaska’s torture did not end there. The next interrogation even left a permanent reminder of captivity: a brand. An officer took hold of Vaska, stripped him of his shirt, and, after heating up a five-pointed star, seared it to his stomach and chest. “Vaska cried in pain,” Savin recalled, and “his eyes filled with blood.” Savin was next. One officer grabbed his legs, while two more pulled down his pants and spread his legs apart. “The crackling hiss was like pouring wax into a candle flame. Every drop forced me to bend like a bow, to tense up from a suffocating scream.”<sup>72</sup>

Captivity left many memories of horror. Ziuzin’s memory of imprisonment was filled with images of death. Upon arriving at the Polish prison camp outside Lodz, where he and his fellow prisoners “flowed like dark lifeless lava” off the train platform, he noticed an enormous cemetery nearby and wondered whether it contained prisoners’ graves. As they filed

69. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 78.

70. *Ibid.*, 29, 31.

71. Afonin and Iurtsev, eds., *Na front i na fronte*, 25.

72. *Ibid.* Eduard Dune gives a similar description of interrogation in Eduard M. Dune, *Notes of a Red Guard*, trans. and ed. Diane P. Koenker and S. A. Smith (Urbana, 1993), 161–69.

out of the train, his captors ordered everyone to the bathhouse. Even this much-needed shower, however, ended in despair. After bathing, they were forced to stand half-naked in the cold, which “sent many off to the cemetery, while a good number remained crippled for life with frostbitten toes, fingers, and knees.” Even Ziuzin’s prison clothes reeked of death from the dead prisoners who had worn them before. Stricken with dysentery, Ziuzin managed to escape hard labor and was given a job as an orderly in the infirmary. This job turned out to be “the most insufferable,” however, for Ziuzin was subjected to the “constant groans, cries, and begging of almost a hundred patients.” “Even a healthy person would lose his mind in such an environment,” he recalled. “I simply did not have the strength” to endure seeing dozens of people dying every night or to watch their bodies get “stacked like firewood” in the camp morgue.<sup>73</sup>

Ziuzin’s most intimate brush with this living nightmare came one night when a young man, a worker from Moscow, cried out in delirium for an hour. When the boy finally went silent, Ziuzin called a doctor, who declared the boy dead. Ziuzin and another orderly tossed the body on a pile of corpses in the morgue and returned to the barracks. After settling back at his desk, however, Ziuzin heard a sudden knock on the door. “Who’s there? Come in!” There was no answer. He went to the door and opened it wide. “And there I froze with fright. In front of me was the guy we had taken to the morgue a few minutes earlier on all fours with a pale face and dead eyes. After seeing the light, he passed out from exhaustion at my feet. The poor fellow didn’t last until morning. The horror of the corpses gave him the final kiss of death.”<sup>74</sup>

Komsomol youths went to war with a romantic ideal of revolutionary heroism and glory. Like Senka Nazerenko, they desired “to settle accounts for the mockery of the proletariat, to die heroically, to give [their] life and blood on the field of death, and return as knight[s] [*rytsar’*] of the revolution.”<sup>75</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, the Komsomol promoted this undaunted revolutionary heroism to inspire its young throngs, in the words of Nikolai Chaplin, “to relentlessly prepare for new future battles.” Veterans’ memoirs, however, were not simple chronicles of heroism. Instead, they set romantic gestures alongside memories of dislocation, loss, deprivation, and pain. Much like combatants in other modern wars, these veterans presented the experience of war as a transformation from a younger self full of romantic idealism into a more melancholic self capable of seeing death as a possible escape from the hardships of combat.<sup>76</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that many veterans found it difficult to adjust to peacetime society. One such veteran was Comrade P, who, at nineteen years old, had served at the front, joined the communist under-

73. Afonin and Gurvich, eds., *Boevye dni*, 11–12.

74. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

75. RGASPI, f. 26M, op. 1, d. 114, l. 11.

76. Samuel Hynes, “Personal Narratives and Commemoration,” in J. M. Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), 218.

ground in White occupied territory, and later served briefly in the Cheka. When his postwar life as a *rabfak* student proved an impossible adjustment, P. concluded that combat had rendered him more a revolutionary relic than a hero. “We are superfluous,” he lamented. “Now other people are needed. Battle charges are no more [and] we are only suited for danger and fighting. The dull peacefulness does not suit us and we are not suited for it.” His combat experience, which included witnessing a massacre that “filled him with a great, unquenchable hatred for White Guards,” was so decisive that the sight of Nepmen sent him into an uncontrollable rage. Sometimes P. experienced flashbacks where he would “cross into another world . . . [in which] he finds himself in battle once again, commanding, chasing enemies, and serving the revolution in his own way.”<sup>77</sup> So-called red invalids like P., as the psychological literature of the 1920s dubbed them, were prone to uncontrollable rage, hysteria, paranoia, seizures, flashbacks, alcohol and drug use, and a whole host of other physical and mental disabilities.<sup>78</sup>

The traumatic legacies of civil war, however, were not limited to soldiers. As Komsomol memoirists noted, the period was like a storm that engulfed society at large.<sup>79</sup> In some ways, therefore, the shattered self narrated in Komsomol war memoirs is emblematic of a greater collective trauma.<sup>80</sup> Traumatic events, particularly those of the magnitude of total war and revolution, possess a social dimension that strikes a blow to “the basic tissues of social life, that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community.”<sup>81</sup> Proof of this is abundant. Even doctors identified an increase in psychological disorders, suicides, and other mental illnesses in the 1920s.<sup>82</sup>

77. A. B. Zalkind, *Revoliutsiia i molodezh': Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 1926), 42–43.

78. S. I. Gol'denberg, “O rezul'tatakh psikhologicheskogo obsledovaniia invalidov voiny,” in A. I. Miskinov, ed., *Sovetskaia meditsina v bor'ba za zdorovye nervy: Sbornik statei i materialov* (Ul'ianovsk, 1926), 83. Very few comprehensive studies of the effects of World War I on soldiers were conducted in the Soviet period. One of these was I. N. Filimonov, *Traumaticheskii nervoz: Po materialam voiny 1914–1918 g.* (Moscow, 1926).

79. On the devastating effects of the period on Russian society, see Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (2000; Bloomington, 2005); Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation*; I. V. Narskii, *Zhizn' v katastrofe: Budni naseleniia Urala v 1917–1922 gg.* (Moscow, 2001); Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia* (London, 2000).

80. Historians have unwittingly used the language of trauma to describe the period. Moshe Lewin wrote that the period caused “sudden shocks,” “shock waves,” and “waves of unsettling events.” In commenting on the demographic impact of the war, William Rosenberg, citing Carol Hayden, wrote that the civil war “had an overwhelming traumatic effect on Russian society,” a premise, he noted, that few doubted. Haimson, “Civil War and the Problem of Social Identities,” 25; Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York, 1985), 296; William G. Rosenberg, “Commentary: The Elements of Social and Demographic Change in Civil War Russia,” in Koenker, Rosenberg, and Suny, eds., *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War*, 123.

81. Kai Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, 1995), 187.

82. Kenneth M. Pinnow, *Lost to the Collective: Suicide and the Promise of Soviet Socialism, 1921–1929* (Ithaca, 2010). On the place of maiming, psychological trauma, and war disability in the memory of World War I, see Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory*, 113–24.

If the shattered identity of Komsomol civil war veterans is indeed emblematic of Russian society at large, we should certainly count it among the many forms of collective trauma that affected the understandings and constructions of self in the 1920s and 1930s. "Soviet Man" experienced interwar Russia in a perpetual state of helplessness, lack of control, and absence of agency.<sup>83</sup> This unending state of disorientation might partially explain why so many readily desired to refashion themselves according to the utopian principles of Soviet ideology. Finding solace within the collective could have been a way to cope, find place, and even bid farewell to a previous life of despair. If this was indeed the case, the vicissitudes of Stalinist civilization may have served as not only the cause and symptom of but also, dare I say, the therapy for this great darkness that inhabited Soviet man.

83. Anna Krylova suggests a similar perspective on Soviet man in Anna Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 138.