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## DISCUSSIONS ABOUT MODERN BATTLE PROSE IN LITERARY CRITICISM

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### *Abstract*

This article presents and analyzes the main discussions about modern battle prose in literary criticism: a debate about the reasons for the lack of interest in texts about wars of the turn of the XX–XXI centuries among readers; on the involvement of modern battle science in fiction; on the heroes of military prose of recent decades (as a rule, we are talking about a man who, besides his own will, has been thrown into the borderline situation between life and death. At such moments, existential questions are higher than morality, and self-preservation is more important than heroism); a new perspective on the interactions of readers and authors, about the stylistic dominants of modern literary texts about fighting in the Caucasus (in the Chechen Republic and in the Republic of South Ossetia). In the conversation about the last discussion, the emphasis is on the lack of auto-reflection; optional plot in many cases; the image of the Chechens; propensities for naturalism; cinematography; attempts not only to comprehend the wars of the turn of the XX–XXI centuries and to fix their features, but also to identify the causes and point out the grave spiritual consequences of the mass involvement of the population in large-scale armed conflicts. A lot of attention in the material is given to the concept of "Homeland" and its rethinking by participants in the Caucasian wars of recent decades and authors who write about it.

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**Keywords:** Caucasian wars, discussions, literary criticism, battle studies, interpretation.



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## **1. Introduction**

The writer Bakin (2004) recorded the stories of the parents of soldiers who did not return from Afghanistan and Chechnya about their sons, their misfortune and pain. This is an extremely interesting experiment, but still an artistic interpretation of such tragic events as the Chechen wars of the late XX–early XXI century, is urgently needed both for the country and the people. And this seemingly impossible task, modern Russian literature has practically fulfilled, and this study is devoted to this.

Rudalev (2006) begins his article on “Chechen” prose with a tough statement: “There is no full-fledged and self-sufficient literature on the Chechen campaign” (para. 6). This was said in 2006. Since then, much has changed, and the critic’s statement is clearly outdated: such literature, exists, lives, develops, and this literature is diverse and interesting. Some critics and literary scholars are engaged in its study. There are not so many studies of different levels and character about the battle prose of the last decades, but they exist, therefore, a brief review of materials on military prose devoted to military clashes in Chechnya and South Ossetia is necessary. And especially interesting are those moments in comprehending battle prose that cause controversy and debate among critics and literary critics. It is these facts that have become the subject of close attention of the authors of the material.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Contemporary Russian battle prose is interested in events in the Chechen Republic and the Republic of South Ossetia. In recent years, a significant number of studies of a critical and literary nature about this phenomenon have appeared. Many authors of such studies enter into discussions among themselves and defend their point of view on the most diverse aspects of battle texts. The study of such controversial issues and questions has become the main task of the authors of the article.

## **3. Research Questions**

The subject of the article are literary-critical and literary texts about fiction related works of art written in recent decades in connection with the wars in the Caucasus (in the Chechen Republic and the Republic of South Ossetia).

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The scientific novelty of the article is directly related to the object of study: modern Russian battle prose about the Chechen events of the late XX–early XXI centuries and its interpretation in criticism. The relevance of armed confrontation is increasing every day in connection with political events in the world, reflected in art. The aim of the study is an attempt to clarify some features of the debatable issues related to modern battle science, which differs sharply from what was presented in the military literature of the Soviet period. In general, we can say that the material was written to clarify the parameters of these differences and the subsequent formulation of the features of the "new concept of war".

## 5. Research Methods

The research methodology is based on general scientific (generalization, abstraction) and experimental methods (observation, comparison, induction). Studying the features of the image of Chechen events in modern battle literature can become the basis for developing a constructive approach to the formulation of lessons that can be learned from the tragic events that took place in the Caucasus at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Discussion about the lack of interest in battle prose among the modern readers

One of the discussions in connection with the battle literature was devoted to the reasons for the lack of interest in this topic from readers, especially young ones. Very different versions have been spoken out.

Perova (2007), director of Glas Publishing House, is sure that there are a lot of good texts about the war, but the society does not want to pay attention to them: “Now there are so few really strong impressions that one can be penetrated only by war. And the best examples of modern prose are often works of war. Another thing is that we almost do not see such prose. This is probably because the society does not want to read about the distressing, requiring an emotional response” (Perova, 2007; Mydans, 2003, para. 2).

In the preface to the series of articles on modern military prose, it is said that young authors neglect the battle topic, since they have no personal experience. The second reason is rooted in the fact that the media has too belaboured the topic of recent wars, which repels serious writers. A third possible reason is the reader’s reluctance to return to military topics in principle (Bennett, 2001; Literature and War, 2000).

Berezin (2000) is sure that the problem is that “after the battle you can write reports” (para. 4), and stories are created many years later, when a sufficiently long time period passes. The critic convincingly and reasonably leads the reader to the idea that the Great Patriotic War was a great national misfortune, and now there is no general mobilization, so the wars of recent decades have affected only a small percentage of the population. Therefore, there are radically fewer texts about wars, and their quality is radically lower.

Kabakov (2000) sees the “non-reality” of all wars after the Great Patriotic War as the reason for the lack of keen interest in literature on military subjects: “That war was unconditional in terms of goals, scale, and the attitude of the participants to it. It was a war with a capital letter, and not only because it was called the Patriotic War. For the most part, people in that war did not separate themselves from what was happening, and therefore it became not only existential, but also, I dare say, spiritual and religious experience for both ordinary participants and writers who took it as the theme or at least the background of their writings. Everyone participated in that war and all blamed for it” (para. 3) (Ram, 1999). And then the war became more and more unrealistic.

Many consequences follow, including stylistic ones: if everything that happened there was a war for those who fought in Chechnya, then officials, both military and civilian, preferred to call the Chechen

events differently: “counter-terrorist operation”, “restoration of constitutional order”, “Chechen campaign” (Dovletkireeva, 2008, para. 5).

The inconclusiveness of the war in its modern form on the territory of Russia and South Ossetia, its dubious goals and objectives, are also a motive for the reader who does not want to find out anything about this, does not want to touch the pain of people who went through this war.

Dovletkireeva (2008) said very metaphorically and succinctly about this: “The very concept of the Motherland in the consciousness of the hero is scattered, lost, faded. Is this your country if you have to crawl along it and not walk?” (para. 8).

Dovletkireeva (2008) insists on yet another aspect of the new feeling of the warring people described in modern texts: she says that Russian soldiers are becoming more insecure about their cause, that they are forced to “cultivate a feeling of hatred for the people and the land to which they are in principle indifferent, whose language, laws and customs they do not know, and find difficult to determine or understand correctly the difference in cultures” (para. 11) (Anderson, 1991; Ignatieff, 1993; Naimark, 2001; Taylor, 1999).

## **6.2. Disputes about the involvement of modern battle texts in fiction**

In books about the Great Patriotic War, the authors often showed situations in which the war reveals the strengths and weaknesses of a person, as if checking his strength. Of the modern authors writing about Chechen events, this method is perhaps used only by A. Prokhanov. For the rest of the writers, everything was messed up in the new war: Chechens can fight in Russian special forces, blow themselves up together with Russian policemen to prevent warlords from taking possession of a weapons warehouse and so on.

In the years of World War II, there were still persistent ideas about duty, new wars were described in such a way that the reader was made aware: a well-fed, dressed, washed, well-to-do soldier would have fought much better. That is, fighting is a job, a profession, not a duty. In this sense, the question posed by the critic Pustovaya (2005) is extremely interesting: “And should, incidentally, a professional pursue the end of a war who gets a fee for every day of the conflict?”.

Pustovaya (2005) considers Viktor Nekrasov to be the most obvious predecessor of the modern approach to military topics. His desire for documentary, for fixing the truth about the war was borrowed and developed by many young authors. But even in comparison with V. Nekrasov, to whom the Soviet literary leaders were very skeptical, today's authors of “military” prose absolutely deideologize the battle, showing the war as a deliberately and undeniably anti-human phenomenon.

A very important feature of the image of war by modern authors is the perception of the space enveloped in hostilities as foreign, dirty, unacceptable.

Arkady Babchenko, who later became an odious political figure, is considered the founder of Chechen military prose. He was the first who dared to write about Chechnya not with journalistic purposes, but with a desire to use his artistic means to translate his experience on paper. V.Pustovaya speaks about this in a very voluminous way, “A text significant as eyewitness testimony, a text laying on the table with a whole piece of war land, a cry text; wouldn't its analysis turn into an outright abuse of the

pain presented in it? Babchenko was crushed by the reality of war. He crawled through the war with such a crushed piece of mirror and reflected” (Pustovaya, 2005, para. 4).

Pustovaya (2005) draws a shocking conclusion that “the professional and ethical ideals of the army were ... caricatured, ridiculed, compromised in the practice of life and in the public mind” (para. 7) (Mosse, 1985). And the basis for the process of "caricaturization" was precisely the battle prose about the Chechen events. By the way, prose about the war in South Ossetia does not have this quality: the war was noble for the Ossetians and was defensive, not civil.

The army in modern prose about the war, and it is true, is represented very negatively. If we trace the references to the eternal army theme of hazing, many authors show that young warriors suffer humiliation and deprivation in the hope that in the future they themselves will be able to “push the new arrivals” (Pustovaya, 2005; Goldhagen, 1997; Gregor, 1999; Wiess, 2003; Wistrich, 1991). This interpretation is not convincing. Rather, we can say that the motivation of the army representatives has changed: their main goal was revenge for the deceased comrades. In the modern concept of war, revenge is precisely the basis, the basis for the desire to remain at the front and participate in the next military operations. The more immoral and meaner the politicians and commanders were (along the vertical of submission), the closer the army collectives rallied horizontally.

The peculiarity of the texts of the XXI century, which is completely unthinkable to see in the prose of the Great Patriotic War, is the description of the incompetent actions of the command, the inhumanity of the officers, their lack of professionalism, rampant bullying and other types of so-called hazing, the state’s indifference to how were dressed, armed, fed, provided with medicines warriors of the Russian army conducting hostilities.

Thus, the second discussion in connection with modern wars is connected with discussions about whether, in principle, most of the texts about the events of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries can be attributed to fiction.

Dovletkireeva (2008) proposes to call the literary texts that appeared in recent decades about Chechnya “new military prose,” which is completely justified and true. But not all scholars of such literature agree with its inclusion in fiction in principle.

Some critics and readers accuse modern battle texts of lack of artistry, excessive documenting, roughness, friability of the plot and the desire for cinematically accurate descriptions of what happened. These are the very qualities that are demanded by the majority of readers who nevertheless turn to military prose of the last decades, because they make the texts reliable, honest, sincere, valuable for their rawness, simplicity and naturalism, which together cannot help but ward off from war, from any of its manifestations .

### **6.3. Discussion about the heroes in the battle prose of recent decades**

Actively debated is the question of heroes. Can those who fought during the Chechen and South Ossetian campaigns be considered as such?

A distinctive feature of the “new military prose” in comparison with the “lieutenant” literature of the second half of the 20th century, according to the literary critic from Chechnya L. Dovletkireeva, is the absence of heroes in the original sense of the word: strong, courageous patriots who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the Fatherland, who have no doubt that this sacrifice is necessary, admirable for many of

their qualities: the desire for achievement, the ability to forget about oneself, perseverance and fearlessness. Dovletkireeva (2008) writes on this subject, “It would seem that in the face of danger, in a critical, borderline situation, the individual should open up as he really is, and not only for others, but also for himself. However, instead of the expected individualization, complete depersonalization takes place (in an alienated being, everyone acts like the others do, turning into a “gray, monophonic” mass), very quickly they become aware of their insignificance in front of the brute force of war” (para. 1).

However, one can only partially agree with this criticism: in a number of texts there are true heroes, people who can mobilize at the right moment and give everything they possess, even life. That's just they do it not for the Fatherland. Sometimes it is for friends, sometimes out of a sense of duty, but there is practically no patriotism in modern prose about Chechnya. Homeland is not a mother, but a stepmother. And she is often reproached and accused of cynicism than they want to protect. Perplexity over the need to fight, a lack of understanding of goals, a sense of the absurdity of what is happening displaces that bright feeling for one's own country, which was sung about in the famous hit “S chego nachinayetsa Rodina?” (“Where does the Homeland begin?”) Sometimes, in modern battle texts, heroes clearly and confidently share their homeland and state.

For critics, the war in Chechnya is the depersonalization of those who take part in it. But the factual material confirms the opposite: the brightness and memorability of the heroes, their charisma and a distinct personality, which makes their death especially irreparable.

In an extensive article on contemporary military prose, Dovletkireeva (2008) writes, “Even the “front-line brotherhood” anthemed by Remarque is unfamiliar to the fighters of new wars” (para. 2). It is impossible to agree with this. In the overwhelming majority of texts, united by the theme of the Chechen war, it is the front-line brotherhood, the desire to protect the children fighting alongside, that becomes the motive for the heroic behavior of Russian fighters. We can safely say that the modern war never ends for its participants. A sufficiently large number of texts tells exactly about how the guys who were broken, crushed, crumpled by Chechnya could not find themselves in the peaceful post-war life.

#### **6.4. Reader and writer: a new perspective of interaction**

It would be completely unthinkable for a conversation about the war in Soviet times to be a conversation about the guilt of the reader before those who participated in military events, because there was no and could not be a division into those who participated and those who did not. But, according to critics, “the specific features of the narrative of modern battle prose are the conflicting relationship between the writer and the reader, the surreal chronotope, total degeneration, emphasis on the absurdity and senselessness of what is happening” (Aristov, 2013, para. 2).

Of course, traditional problems are presented at the level of a realistic and sometimes naturalistic description of military everyday life. The similarity of the description of military everyday life in “lieutenant” literature and modern “trench truth” is manifested in narrative principles: in reduced fiction, in emphasized autobiography, in first-person narrative, in a tendency to naturalistic methods of depicting the world.

However, the community of creativity of the authors of "lieutenant prose" and modern narrativists, discovered at different levels, does not at all lead to the complete similarity of their ideological and aesthetic principles, the closeness of the concepts of the world and personality. In the new military prose,

which describes local conflicts, it is precisely "participation" and accuracy in the depiction of military life that become paramount. "The title of the book by V. Mironov "I was in this war", where the use of the pronoun "I" "demonstrates the paramount modality of personal presence is indicative" (Aristov, 2013, para. 5).

In the battle literature of our time, there is a constant conflict between the author who fought and the reader who did not fight. Many authors openly express their indignation over the fact that readers did not participate in anti-war rallies, did not raise funds to help their soldiers, and turned away from the trains in which the children were taken to the place of military battles. One of the writers even noted that those who did not go to war were simply obliged to at least read about it the terrible and heartbreaking that he and his comrades-in-arms, and then "comrades-in-pens" (or rather, in a keyboard) could write about the experience.

"In modern military prose, there is no clear image of the enemy. The internal impulses of the opponents' actions, their psychology remain obscure to the modern soldier, concerned about their own experiences and motivations," writes Aristov (2013, para. 7) (Glucksmann, 2002). Perhaps this factor also influenced the transformation of the reader into an enemy.

In most cases in the history of Russia, the enemy has always come from abroad, from someone else's space. However, the wars caused by the collapse of the USSR showed that the border of one's own and another's can arise inside the country. The fratricidal division into "friends" and "strangers" in modern military prose is becoming more dramatic than in the literature of past decades.

### **6.5. Stylistic dominants of modern battle authors**

The space of V. Mironov, A. Babchenko, Z. Prilepina is a landscape, the leitmotifs of which are swamp and dirt. This landscape is ideologically loaded: it allegorically expresses the state of the surrounding world and the internal state of the narrator himself. "A swamp, where, as at a point, time and space collapse, where two elements are not separated: water (life) and earth (death), is an allegory of the chaos of war. Like a swamp, war sucks a person in and does not let go" (as cited in Aristov, 2013, para. 9).

The plot in the traditional sense in many modern battle texts is absent or formal: the hero's self-reflection absorbs the event plan, which is only a background for the image of the internal state. The reader is presented with a chronicle recording of events, fragments that cannot be lined up in a linear, chronologically substantiated logical chain.

"The fragmentation of the narrative is also explained by the influence of television laws. They dispute the traditional linearity of the representation of reality, giving rise to an image of a world in which there is no consistency and interconnectedness" (Aristov, 2013, para. 14).

One of the researchers of battle prose about Chechen events, L. Dovletkireeva, is interested not so much in Russian literature on Chechnya as in Russian-language Chechen literature, which she closely deals with. And there are many interesting observations that belong to a person who studies the situation from the inside and analyzes the texts of those who were participants in the events from the other, Chechen, side.

L. Dovletkireeva is sure that Russian authors deliberately ignore two topics: attempts to artistically explore the opposite side of the conflict, that is, Chechen fighters, and an explanation of the cruelty of

Russian soldiers in relation to the civilian population of the Caucasian republic. "This gives the authors a somewhat one-sided character of objectivity, the limit of which is strictly outlined. Do they thereby wish to remain honest with themselves? They say, it is better to remain silent than to deceive, retouching the unsightly truth. Or are the feelings of "others" of little interest to them? Maybe what they could talk about, too terribly, painfully for themselves and society as a whole, will cause an ambiguous reaction and it makes sense to protect themselves without saying so? Is there any place here for the realization of our own involvement in the incident? Indeed, peaceful people suffer primarily from shelling, bombing, assaults and sweeps" (Dovletkireeva, 2008, para. 4).

It is impossible to agree with the representative of the philological community of the Chechen Republic on this issue. The factual material convincingly demonstrates that the images of the militants are presented in as many details as possible, there are even attempts to trace the evolution of these images, the gradual transformation of heroes from civilians, sometimes party functionaries and officials, into cunning and skillful field commanders. As for sympathy for civilians, for children and women, the works of "new military prose" are simply full of sympathy, shouting about it. Many heroes do not find themselves in a peaceful post-war life, precisely because they were inadvertently involved in the death of a child or an old man. And the authors of the "Chechen" texts, who personally went through military situations, often write precisely out of inability to cope with the cruelty and the horror that they had to endure in Chechnya.

Dovletkireeva (2008) says the following about the image of the militant: "In the new "military" prose there is no integral image of the militant at all. He is not outlined clearly, is served by the same emotional touches, as, for example, in Z. Prilepin's "Sergeant": "Czechs", "bearded", "gloomy", "devils", "demons", "evil", as if it's about ghosts, shadows, not living people. Those are the enemy's psychology, internal impulses and motives of his actions remain "behind the scenes", obscure to the soldier of new wars, concerned about his own feelings and motivations" (para. 5). The judgment is clearly one-sided and unfair. All the arguments of the authors about the ethnic features of the Caucasians, about the properties of the Chechen mentality, about the influence of the teip structure of society on the individual, about the ideology of Islam, which left its mark on how the war was fought, are attempts to understand the enemy's psychology. Another thing is that understanding terrified the Russian soldiers and became the basis for "their own experiences and motivations" (Dovletkireeva, 2008), including revenge.

The idea of Dovletkireeva (2008) seems convincing and justified, because the texts, which are prone to documenting, naturalism, and the truth of the war, not covered by exquisite paths, act very strongly on the reader. "Attempts of Russian writers of indirect artistic refraction against the backdrop of such prose sometimes seem inconspicuous, openly lose the "retelling of reality", giving it up as literature and falsehood" (para. 7). Sometimes it is just this: the "excessive" artistic processing of the truth looks fake and seems to be an attempt to veil the horror of what happened, to hide it behind the different "beauties" of speech turns and plot constructions.

Chechen literature on the events in the Caucasus is represented by both prose writers and young authors. The material of a Chechen literary critic says of them: "They are also eyewitnesses, participants in the events who survived the military tragedy, but they are not warriors and do not seek to show the daily truth of the war, portray it through the eyes of their characters, as a rule, representatives of the

intelligentsia: journalist, writer, teacher literature, the artist (the influence of personal experience, of course). Their view also inspires confidence, in any case, among the Chechen readers, who is difficult to be fooled by fiction, because they have something to compare (their own life, the fate of friends, acquaintances, village, city, republic). The best of their works are subject to the laws of art: metaphors, characters, storylines, episodes, etc. consistently embody the author's intention, reveal the main idea, which in fact turns out to be common with Russian prose devoted to this topic: war is inhumane, whatever goals its participants pursue. The authors' task is not to record what happened in the war, but to make sense in an artistic form, identify the causes and point out the most difficult consequences: spiritual and moral" (Dovletkireeva, 2008, para. 10).

## 7. Conclusion

The following can be said about discussions related to modern battle prose.

The fact that the heroes of modern prose cannot even explain to themselves the motives, the reasons for their stay in Chechnya, more than anything else, discredits a war that destroys people, if not physically, then psychologically, morally.

All the reasons mentioned by critics can be reduced to the concept of a "new concept of war", the essence of which is that the warrior's case in modern texts about the war was lost in advance, because it is impossible to justify such a war, and none of modern authors even tries to do this: "This purely modern, relatively recent concept of war is new for us, from school accustomed to seeing the high feat of the warriors of the Kulikov, Borodino, Stalingrad battles in the war. For traditional consciousness, war is a military affair, as noble and eternal as some blacksmith or agricultural" (Pustovaya, 2005, para. 3).

In most of the works, authored by the fellows who went through the war, direct witnesses and participants in the events, "the war is shown in a new perspective for the Russian reader: the war inherently, in general, without a jingoistic and pathos surroundings, regardless of the duty of the defender or condemnation of the aggressor; the place and time of the action seems to be concrete, but at the same time, they are seemingly secondary. And in the perception of the characters and their creators, it appears as an aimless, unprincipled, unconditional evil, where fear, loneliness and insecurity become dominant feelings" (Dovletkireeva, 2008, para. 12).

The hero of modern battalism is keenly aware of his estrangement from the space of modern warfare, since they are not connected with it by ideology, purpose, or worldview. The focus of modern military prose is the history of man, most often in addition to his will of life and death abandoned into the borderline situation. He sees war as violence against his human nature. Under these conditions, the solution of existential issues is higher than morality, self-preservation is higher than feats and heroism.

The narration of modern authors is introverted, the fact of resorting to writing work serves as a unique way of healing from injury, while the functions of the reader as an accomplice are excluded, the reader is one of the representatives of whom the warring authors include the concept of "enemies".

The confrontation not only of official ideology or the dominant art system, but also of the reader leads many battle authors out of the actual literary process. It is significant that a large layer of modern military prose, as well as criticism about it, is located in the virtual space of the Internet.

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