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Evading Military Service and Tales of Hidden Artillery: Military Legends in Estonian Folklore

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Abstract: The article explores Estonian military lore, focusing on the legends and rumours that circulated mainly among men conscripted into the Soviet army, but also among those who served in the Estonian Defence Forces. Many of these legends played an important role in fostering a sense of camaraderie among the troops and continue to circulate as part of men's oral tradition. Although, unfortunately, the legends were not collected during their active spread, we can get some idea of this cultural phenomenon from discussion threads posted on online military forums (e.g., www.militaar.net) and from comparative material sent to the Estonian Folklore Archives in the 1990s. The legends and rumours in the memories of servicemen and veteran soldiers tell us about hidden weapons, army discipline, strategies to evade military service, sexuality, fate, and serendipity, as well as exploring particular natural objects in local landscapes (bridges, secret passages, etc.)

Keywords: military mindset, military service, rumours, Soviet army, soldier lore, urban legends

Introduction

Men in my home village on the shore of Lake Kriimani in Tartu County recount stories about a piece of military equipment that was allegedly sunk in the lake during Second World War. Younger men who have moved to the village and its surroundings in recent decades seem particularly eager to spread these tales. Depending on the version of the legend, the sunken object is either a tank, a plane, or an artillery piece. The context lends some plausibility to the story since Lake Kriimani is six metres deep, and during the war, the village was the site of at least one major battle, during which several houses were burnt down and the villagers had to hide themselves and their cattle deep in the Kriimani meltwater valley. The legend may very well have been a true story if only several other artillery pieces and tanks were not known to be hidden in the area. For example, during the Soviet period, boys at the local primary school often talked about a tank that had sunk in a bog a few kilometres outside the village (see Kalmre 2022: 183, 257). While discovering such a 'treasure' is of course not entirely beyond the realm of possibility, a closer examination of the plausibility of the legends often reveals that there are many who believe a story and agree with it despite no real identifiable witnesses having come forward. The legend about Kriimani village is unique in that it was not very popular in the post-war decades but attracted more attention with the arrival of newcomers in the 21st century.

Indeed, these stories can be viewed as a rather typical part of men's military narrative tradition. Reflecting men's expectations, values, and ideologies, these legends recount recent history through seemingly true events. The narratives share strong, possibly gender-based, features and belief content, and are typically repetitive or reiterative.

Legends and Gender

In folklore research, stories of this kind are regarded as contemporary elaborations of the old legend genre, i.e. contemporary legends, or, according to the definition of international folklore studies, urban legends or urban tales. All the definitions serve as descriptive concepts rather than analytical terms. It is, perhaps, worth emphasising from the very start that the following article is a

folkloristic study that follows the idiosyncrasies and principles of these narrative genres (legends, urban legends, rumours) and motifs. Stories like this were simply regarded as part of daily life as they reflected accounts of real events and were not collected as folklore in Estonia or elsewhere in the world until the 1980s, when the first monographs on the subject appeared (see, e.g., Brunvand 1981, Virtanen 1987, and many others). Indeed, the legends are based on the daily life and problems that people encounter, and, as mentioned above, it is plausible that many of these events actually took place. The only exception is that people do not narrate a single event, and since there appear to be many similar events, it could be referred to as a tradition. A characteristic feature of these urban legends, at least of the tales explored here, is their traditionality, including recurring topics, plots and motifs. In some cases, as will be shown below, similar narrative motifs and plotlines can be found throughout history.

Gillian Bennet has characterised contemporary legends based on a sliding 'told as truth' scale, which has also been referred to as the rhetorical weight of legends. Essentially this means that depending on the accent/tonality used in narration, a legend can be told as truthful (the event or incident really took place), as questionable, or as a joke. The same plot can be conveyed as a brief account or rumour or a longer elaborate tale (legend). There are some plots in which, depending on the performance, the narrative can be part of a personal experience in the form of a legend, memorate, anecdote, or rumour (Bennett 1988, 32–33; see also Kalmre 1996; Kalmre 2008, 28–35, etc.). A notable feature of legend is its seeming specificity, suggesting that the events have happened to someone somewhere. At the same time, telling these legends required that its sources were not fully detailed and verifiable, which the narrators might subconsciously avoid.

This was very likely the case also with the alleged piece of military technology lying in the bottom of Lake Kriimani. Men living in the farms surrounding the lake were well-informed about the events that happened in the area during the war, and talking about these may have elicited numerous counterarguments from the listeners. As time passed and the audience changed, the stories gained more plausibility and popularity. The fact that the tale had been heard from a friend, who had heard it from a friend of a friend who had once lived in the village, served as a guarantee for the narrator and audience that it was a true story.

Contemporary legends have scarcely been studied through the lens of gender stereotypes and specifics. Some studies have discussed typical gender-specific

behaviours in narrative plots, noting, for example, how storytellers of different gender sometimes modify the contents of the narrative based on their intent. Gender is also an important factor in the dissemination of these tales, in terms of who tells the story to whom and who is perceived as the protagonist or hero (see Henken 2004). While themes like war, the army, weapons, and battles have traditionally been associated with men, women soldiers are common these days as well. In Western folklore studies, this aspect of men's folklore, including legends, has been studied mainly in the context of specific conflicts, such as the Vietnam, Korean, or Gulf wars (Brunvand 2000, 149). The rather distinct context makes it difficult to compare the material with relevant Estonian sources, which is why the studies referred to above are mainly tentatively categorising and descriptive reviews. Comparative material could potentially be found among Russian sources, if it were not for the fact that, in Russian folklore studies, research into contemporary narrative lore, including urban legends, was started only recently and there are no studies on legends that circulated in Russian or Soviet armies, or they are not accessible. In any case, the author has not had access to such comparative material on the subject nor to related comparative reviews or studies from Latvia or Lithuania. Yet, we could pre-emptively argue that even the review here introduces several legends that circulated not only among Estonian men but also in the Soviet army in general.

Military narrative lore by no means constitutes a homogeneous corpus, as part of it is universal material about military service, weapons and the like, and part of it emerges and spreads in specific contexts, such as during wars and military conflicts. Several legends and rumour cycles, based on these legends, which initially circulated in the traditional repertoire of men or soldiers, later achieved a wider spread due to some extraordinary circumstance. One of such examples is the miraculous legend The Boy(s) Saved by the Snake, known in regions of the former Soviet Union and associated with the Afghanistan war[1] (Kalmre 2018). Rumours about female snipers of primarily Baltic ethnicities, colloquially known as White Tights, biathletes who shot soldiers in more sensitive parts of the body, have circulated among Russian soldiers probably since the early 1990s. These rumours have resurfaced during various conflicts and military operations started by imperial Russia recently, for example, in Ukraine. The legend has been distributed through various channels, including in feature films and books. Born from the battlefield fears of Russian soldiers, the narratives have been successfully exploited in official Russian propaganda

(Regamey 2017). A highly unique and later widely popular military legend began to circulate in Ukraine in the early days of Russia's invasion. This was the tale of the Ghost of Kyiv, a mythical Ukrainian pilot who purportedly downed a number of Russian planes. Ukraine used the legend to encourage the population's resistance and motivation to fight. Allegedly, the legend went viral due to an associated online game.[2]

Sources

The sources at my disposal for the study of men's military legends were modest rather than adequate. The causes of this scarcity are the limited collecting of men's lore, including soldier's lore, and the lack of studies on men's belief stories. Before the 1990s, research into this specific area of men's folklore was out of the question, partly due to the ideology of the totalitarian Soviet regime and partly because of the retrospective rather than progressive, future-oriented approach used in folklore studies at the time. As late as in 1989–1990, during the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the reinstatement of the Republic of Estonia, folklorist Mall Hiiemäe initiated the collecting of folklore from Estonian men who were at the time serving or had served in the Soviet army. An appeal titled *Teeme sõdurpoistele teenistusaja sisustamiseks ühe ahvatleva ettepaneku* ('An Intriguing Proposal Regarding the Leisure Activities of Soldiers') was published in the popular Estonian youth magazine *Noorus* ('Youth', see issue 8, p. 23) in 1989. Among the nearly seventy respondents to the appeal were young men who served in the army at the time as well as those who had already completed their service. The collected material did not include belief accounts but rather responses to what had been requested in the appeal: soldier's jokes, slang, song parodies, and albums (Hiiemäe 1996). Around the same time, the last groups of Estonians were doing their compulsory military service in the Soviet army, which was evoking heightened public interest and criticism in the opening Estonian society.[3] In the 1990s, public attention increasingly focused on soldiers' humour. A small collection of international military jokes was published titled *Vahva punasõduri ustaav* ('The Brave Red Soldier's Code', see Hiiemäe 1992), followed by *Armeehuumor…* ('Army Humour', 1996). In this collection, Russian military humour was presented through the jokes about Stirlitz and Petka, and Chapaev (Chapai), highly popular generally in Soviet folklore.

Between 2003 and 2005, Merlin Lõiv, a student at the University of Tartu's Department of Folklore collected folklore (mainly jargon, jokes, and songs) from men serving in the Estonian Defence Forces.[4] The material collected between 1989 and 1990, and 2003 and 2005, presented here, does not contain anything that would qualify as urban legends. However, there are several written memoirs that provide context and supplementary detail on this topic. Among these, the book *Nõukogude armee ja Eesti mees* ('The Soviet Army and the Estonian Man') is perhaps more comprehensive and systematic (Tammer 2010). Together, these studies and publications review a range of topics relating to military folklore and background knowledge on serving in the Soviet army.

In the latter half of the 1990s, I started several campaigns to collect urban legends among correspondents of the Estonian Folklore Archives and the general public. Among the material submitted in response to the campaign were stories, collected by Tiit Birkan, a long-term correspondent of the folklore archives, which I initially categorised as local tales. Having become more knowledgeable about the material, I dare to say that it represents a rather universal men's narrative tradition that could be classified as contemporary or urban legends, from a folkloristic perspective.

The core of the material presented below, however, originates from an online Estonian military forum (www.militaar.net).[5] The forum has more than 11,000 male users who post on and discuss various military topics from the past and present. The anonymous users represent men of different ages, some of whom have served in the Estonian Defence Forces; some more elderly men share their recollections about serving in the Soviet army. As the posts contain predominantly recollections, the truthfulness of the tales is questionable, even though the forum users agree that while people used to believe the stories, this is often no longer the case. Many contributors to the forum now view these tales as urban legends. Considering the specifics of collecting legends and related rumours – collecting them is far more complex than collecting, say, jokes, songs, or vocabulary – the online forum provides a unique environment for collecting folklore, serving as a comprehensive archival file of a given legend and its variations, presenting the legend's context and the narrators' and the community's opinions all in the same place. While the material sent by Tiit Birkan was well-structured written narratives/legends, the military forum represents a rather natural narrative space where users can discuss a tale and men who served around the same time in different units share their experiences and talk

about legend plots and related topics, bridging the memories and experiences of younger and older narrators.

As far as I am aware, what follows is the first attempt to give at least a preliminary overview of urban legends and rumours in Estonian men's military folklore. Due to the specific nature of the material, the article leans more towards the past, specifically the Soviet period, rather than contemporary times. Below, I will attempt to review the main themes, recurrent motifs, and plots of military legends, as well as the contexts in which the tales emerge, aspiring to shed light on their versatile semantic dimensions as much as possible, and point out some military legends that have resonated across generations.

The Military World of Men and the Legends Reflecting It

We are used to thinking about war as a monstrous, inhumane tragedy, which no doubt it is. Yet, amidst all the atrocities, for very young men, war can also be a source of excitement and adventure. The author of the present article had not considered this particular aspect until interviewing a local man during fieldwork in Sõrve years ago. At the outset of the Second World War, this very young man from a remote village found himself on the frontline. Despite having witnessed terrible events, the man also said that it was the greatest adventure of his life, for it allowed him to travel to many European countries and see different cities and people. He had been fascinated by weapons and deeply valued the selfless camaraderie among soldiers fighting on the frontline. Almost eighty years have passed since the Second World War, and those who fought in the war are no longer with us. Ammunition and military equipment occupied an important part in the recollections of those whose childhood fell in the post-war period, as these were lying around everywhere, and the games were thrilling. While it was mainly boys who played war games, in the post-war period, girls participated in these activities as well (see Tuisk 2018). Then again, legends about hidden and abandoned military technology captivated boys and men alike, who were eager to share and spread these rumours.

During the nearly half-century when Estonia was involuntarily incorporated into the Soviet Union, compulsory service in the army of a totalitarian country was profoundly unpopular. Service in the Soviet army was seen as an imposition and a punishment, a frightening challenge that people remembered for the

rest of their lives. The author recounts many instances from the 1960s to the 1980s, when the evening before conscription resembled more a funeral wake, with plenty of food and alcohol, from where the still intoxicated young men would leave to the military commissariat, or "slave market", as it was called, the following morning, clad in their oldest clothes (see also Tammer 2010, 48). Service in the Soviet army required men to adapt to a foreign language, environment and cultural space, as well as to strict discipline and unfamiliar ideology, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of kilometres from home. It was a common practice in the Soviet army that young men of different ethnicities, upbringing, education and cultural background were assigned to serve together in a military unit as far away from home as possible. The conscripts were men between the ages of 18 and 21, and service lasted for two years, three for marines; in the 1950s this was three and four years, respectively. The recollections of many men reveal that friendships between the soldiers could last a lifetime, as they bonded over shared concerns and joys, adversities and fears, but also stories, jokes, pranks and mishaps.

Men also tried to evade military service because of the pervasive fear of the harsh and violent *dedovshchina*, the hazing and abuse of younger soldiers by their seniors. The system was perpetuated with former victims of the abuse later inflicting the same abuse on new recruits.[6] Another intimidating factor was the deployment of conscripts to conflict zones like Afghanistan, from where one might not return alive.

Considering the existing material, the men's legend tradition could be divided into six major thematic areas:

1. Ways to evade military service, lucky escapes from being conscripted
2. So-called military mysteries: hidden weapons, hideouts, cellars, etc.
3. Cautionary tales regarding discipline
4. Relationships with women and sex during military service
5. Legends and rumours ridiculing Soviet propaganda
6. Stories about the 'Cultural Other' in the Soviet army

1. Ways to evade military service, lucky escapes from being conscripted

Draft evasion used to be a prevalent theme in the recollections of men who had served in the Soviet army. The topic surfaced in the discussions on the militaar.

net forum in December 2005,[7] where evading military service in the Estonian Defence Forces was directly and strongly condemned. Such condemnation was probably the reason why more traditional urban legends about evading being drafted into the Estonian Defence Forces never became established in the tradition. At the same time, recent statistics indicate that, while it is not a popular subject of discussion, people still find ways (mainly citing health issues) to avoid being conscripted (see Oidsalu 2023).

Several transmitted stories about evading the Soviet army, given here as examples, may qualify as traditional legends. One of the most common tactics for draft evasion was pretending to have mental issues, another reason for one's inadmissibility for service was enuresis (see Tammer 2010, 35–36). However, these tactics were not always effective, as people still tell stories about being caught as draft evaders and deceiving the authorities. Another way to avoid conscription, which often proved successful in real life, was marrying and having children at a very young age. University studies or, for example, being employed at the Dvigatel military factory also helped to get out of or postpone military service, sometimes also reducing its duration.

This topic was indeed highly relevant, with legends about evading Russian military service not only circulating in the Soviet period. Such tales had been told during tsarist rule when military service lasted for 25 years. Folklore contains legends about cunning conscripts who successfully outwitted the authorities, often at the expense of their own health, such as damaging lungs by smoking random substances, or by physically harming oneself.

Since the early days of Estonian-language journalism, quite harrowing stories on this subject emerged. For example, in an 1823 issue of the weekly newspaper *Maarahva Näddala-Leht* by Otto Wilhelm Masing, there is some news about court decisions from that time. One of these news pieces reports on five young men from a rural area who, fearing conscription, had all their teeth pulled out so that they would be deemed inadmissible for 25 years of service. Another newspaper, *Uudisleht* (1938), also mentions this curious incident. Unfortunately, this attempt did not have a happy outcome, since the word got out and the men were conscripted and, in addition, received ten pairs of lashings as corporal punishment. Being diagnosed as having a clubfoot remains another popular way of avoiding military service even today, although other alternatives are also used (see Saare 1999, Vare 2000).

> A country boy was terribly scared of being drafted into the Russian army. Didn't know what to do to escape military service. An acquaintance gave him the address of a town physician who was said to be able to help, for a contribution. The boy even sold his cow to get the money he needed. Then he travelled to the town to see the doctor. The doctor took his money and conducted a physical examination. Couldn't find anything wrong with him, the boy was fit as a fiddle. But since he had accepted the money, the doctor offered the boy a solution: I could castrate you, then you'd be unfit for the service!
>
> The boy agreed – rather have the nuts gone, but at least he would survive! The doctor castrated the boy. Later the army recruitment committee indeed found the boy unfit for service, ironically it was due to clubfoot not because of his missing private part!
>
> Heard that in Harju building cooperative.
>
> EFA II 24, 301/2 < Tallinn, Keila - Tiit Birkan (1997)

The following story about self-mutilation was posted in the discussion thread of militaar.net by a user who goes by the name propatria.

> Once a young man, who tried to avoid being conscripted into the Soviet army at all costs, realised that there was nothing to be done and he would soon be on his way… so he took an axe and severed his thumb and, by accident, another finger.
>
> As he had already passed the medical committee and the decision to conscript him had been made, this incident greatly angered the doctors.
>
> The outcome: the man served for two years far away from home, feeding guard dogs at the border.
>
> (propatria, militaar.net, 2005)

A similar motif is found in early Estonian literary fiction. Lydia Koidula employed it in her 1872 play *Säärane mulk ehk sada vakka tangusoola* ('What a *Mulk*, or a Hundred Bushels of Grouts'). In the play, Enn Erastu deliberately severed his finger to avoid conscription.

In fact, the narratives mentioned above represent two related yet conflicting sides of this folklore. On the one hand, in folklore draft evaders are generally condemned, as avoiding responsibility and accountability has never been considered brave, even during times of occupation. In folktales, poetic legend justice typically prevails: while the evaders do manage to get out of military service, they are punished in some other way. In Koidula's play, Enn Erastu, an evader and self-mutilator, is a reprehensible character partly for this very reason. On the other hand, the motif of the trickster, a hero who cunningly outwits authority, also operates in many of these legends.

Another story about evading Soviet army, recorded by Tiit Birkan, describes an incident where the conscript is simply forgotten and not summoned due to some bureaucratic mix-up. While the situation sounds plausible, waiting for a conscription notice for seven (!) years points to the folkloric nature of the narrative.

> In 1960, a major merging of districts (raions) took place in Estonia. During this process, quite a few things happened. The Mustvee and Põltsamaa districts were merged with the Jõgeva district. Army commissariats were consolidated as well. One guy had been summoned to the Mustvee commissariat just before the districts were merged, had his passport confiscated, was instructed to return to the collective farm which he was part of, and was told to wait for his conscription notice. When I met the tractor driver, he had been waiting for the conscription notice for seven years already.
>
> I'm in no hurry; after a year I'll be 27 and above the conscription age. Well, when I'm about to get married, I'll go and ask for my passport back! This is how the guy himself talked about it.
>
> EFA II 24, 302/3 < Keila – Tiit Birkan (1997)

2. So-called military mysteries: hidden weapons, hideouts, cellars, passages

As mentioned above, tales about artillery, planes, and tanks hidden in bogs, lakes, rivers and forests during the Second World War are frequently mentioned in Estonian local folklore. My experience has been that these legends about lo-

cal natural objects (lakes and forests) tend to circulate among men but remain largely unknown to the broader local community. I became aware of the stories of military equipment hidden in the lake and surroundings, told by men in my home village, only once I started conducting interviews for a local history book. According to the local men, there could be some military technology hidden in off-the-beaten-track forest farmsteads, and people usually tell stories about these to ward off unsuspecting robbers. One such legend was sent to the archives by Tiit Birkan in 1997.

> There was this man from Ida-Viru County who renovated his old farmhouse and moved to live there. The household was doing well. One day, the man found a rusty light machine gun with cartridges. From back in the wartime. The man cleaned the rust off of the machine gun and repaired it. He tested the gun to make sure it worked and hung it on the wall inside the house. The next evening, he suddenly hears a rumble – several cars are driving into his yard. The man went to the doorstep to look – oh, damn, masked men are getting out of the cars! The man rushed back inside, took the machine gun from the wall and went to face the men. The men were shouting: "Gives us your money!"
>
> The man fired warning shots in the air and shouted back: "If you're not gone in five minutes, I'll shoot holes in all of your cars!" The warning worked, and the robbers were gone like a flash. But the man still has that machine gun, he did not take it to the police.
>
> EFA II 24, 399/400 < Keila – Tiit Birkan

Weapons hidden from the enemy present a risk but also provide self-protection and resistance. Tales like this are shared by both younger men and men who used to serve in the Soviet army. On militaar.net forum, two men discuss this as follows:

> I just heard an interesting urban (or perhaps rural) legend from someone I know. The time of the incident: the 1970s (probably early 1970s). The place of the incident: somewhere in Tartu district. The story tells about a quarrel between two village men, who knows what the cause was. And their quarrel became serious. It all escalated to the point when an especially deeply aggravated man went to his barn, started the engine

> of the Tiger [tank] hidden under the hay, and fired a shell at the other man's house. He missed, of course, but it was a real scandal, and the "brave boys" made such a fuss. The man's tank was confiscated, of course. Allegedly there was a small news piece about it in the daily newspaper Edasi ('Forward'), the person who told the story was dead certain about that. So, whoever bothers to dig in the library archives could look into that. Whether this tank really was a Tiger is slightly dubious (it must have been some vehicle with a heavy artillery gun), but the person who told the story was not some old boozer who had drunk seven beers behind a village store, but someone I knew very well. He was around 20 years old when this incident took place. I'm curious if anyone else has heard about the story?
>
> (Manurhin, militaar.net, 2009)

> It happened in Belarus, involving the chairman of the local executive council and a villager, whom the former had told to go fuck himself. And it was no Tiger, but a 76-mm anti-tank gun. But it was said that the village council building got hit.
>
> (polzunov, militaar.net, 2009)

In the response posted by the second user, there is a reference to a rather commonplace character in Soviet urban legends. In the material I have collected over several decades, the antagonist or thief is always a Soviet functionary, such as the chairman of a collective farm or a party organiser.[8]

In a way, these tales are largely reminiscent of the semantic field of ancient treasure lore, where the narrative is often interrelated with practice. In Estonia, detectorism is a popular hobby activity among men, with some detectorists particularly interested in searching for military technology on former Second World War battlegrounds. An illustrative example of how a rumour or tale, heard decades ago, has evolved into a masculine dream about a hidden military treasure, motivating men to take action, was mediated to the public media by journalist Sander Punamäe. An 11-minute video clip from the programme *Postimehe täistund* ('*Postimees* [newspaper]: 60 minutes') depicts Kalle Grünthal, then a member of the Estonian Parliament, and a journalist, searching on the Pärnu River for a Russian howitzer. Kalle Grünthal had learned about it forty

years earlier from his uncle Aadu, who claimed to have seen a (howitzer) gun and its wheel in that location. The howitzer had allegedly been lost in the river during the battle of Türi in 1941, as Russians attempted to cross the Pärnu River. Grünthal had later heard about it from other sources. This section of the river, known only to Grünthal, and not accessible by land, was explored by boat with a scuba diver, an acquaintance of his. Instead of finding the howitzer, they unearthed a 200-litre metal barrel at that place. The clip ends with Kalle Grünthal's comment: "Well, in principle, we didn't find the howitzer. It turned out to be a metal barrel; however, this means that the legend persists and we must continue the search, for I refuse to believe that Aadu, my uncle, lied!" (Punamäe 2022). This remark, in fact, reveals the deeper significance and nature of these legends: we believe the tales because we want to and because we need them.

The video shows that Kalle Grünthal is an avid detectorist who, despite the risks associated with the activity, specifically focuses on searching for military technology and ammunition. In fact, the journalist frames his views on rumours and on Grünthal before the search begins, claiming that Grünthal is known to believe rumours and is sceptical about scientific advances.

It is fascinating to observe the truthfulness, context, and recent history of the tales shared among the community with military interests in the "Exploding pens and other gadgets" sub-thread (Militaar.net 2005). In addition to the exploding pens and mined dolls that were left scattered on the ground in Estonia after the war, the discussions address the war and the post-war periods, the abundance of weapons and ammunition after the war, recollections of how children handled these and the real dangers they presented. Forum members recount legends that someone had heard somewhere, eliciting replies from some users who expressed doubt (dismissing these as mere folklore) and some who believe the tales and agreed that, during the Afghanistan war (1979–1989), the Soviet Union reportedly used these deadly weapons against the civilian population.

> I believe that, first (as was said here before regarding sausage factories and so on) because a folktale tends to expand in scale, and second because children often mistook these stick-shaped, shiny copper and aluminium detonators for pencils or similar things, and you didn't have to wait too long for them to explode upon tampering.
>
> (hillart, militaar.net, 2005)

> About these exploding toys, I recently read in The Black Book of Communism that they were quite widely used by Soviet forces even in Afghanistan. So that quite a few things that we might currently regard as urban legends, could not really be so.
>
> (gnadenlose, militaar.net, 2005)

The third opinion provided on this subject, however, sounds rather plausible, suggesting that these legends might be regarded as cautionary tales. Indeed, the moralising and cautionary function is highly characteristic of contemporary legends. A user participating in the discussion, who writes under the username Frundsberg, said the following:

> Still, the question remains as to how realistic the idea was that someone (probably Russians) would spread such stories in the rear in Estonia. Or should we categorise the majority of these stories into two groups?
>
> 1. Stories that were read in newspapers during the German occupation, which then reached us in the form of folktales;
>
> 2. Real-life events, where someone touched ammunition and, either inadvertently or intentionally (to prevent young boys from getting caught), and the incident was presented as an 'accident' involving a booby trap.
>
> I recall from the newspaper Eesti Sõna that these items were probably dropped from Russian planes into the rear areas.
>
> Wouldn't it be reasonable to think that these stories were generally published to warn kids at the time against touching the ammunition that was lying around everywhere then? In this sense, it would serve the intended purpose – except that 60 years later, we can hardly get to the bottom of the truth here.
>
> (Frundsberg, militaar.net, 2005)

This category also covers legends about Kaliningrad, widely discussed on the militaar.net forum. For reasons unclear, in the Soviet period, many Estonians were sent to serve in Kaliningrad, or Königsberg. In the discussion thread

dedicated to urban legends (militaar.net 2009–2010), men also shared, among other tales, the legends and rumours about Kaliningrad that they had heard while serving there, or from others who had served there. Here emerged a whole array of stories featuring secret cellars, an underground city, constructed by Germans, and German soldiers who are allegedly still hiding there, the Lost Amber Room, and many others. Other more widely known legends told about a mysterious bridge there that no one was ever allowed to demolish, as it would bring doom to the entire city. These were intriguing legends that added spice to their former military service in Kaliningrad, as the men recalled comical incidents involving fellow soldiers who earnestly believed these stories and still harboured fears of the fascist enemy.

The discussion threads on militaar.net reveal that these tales about Stalingrad and Königsberg also circulated in other military units during the Soviet period, and the tales of their fathers about the wartime and the German and Soviet past of Königsberg and Stalingrad are now passed on by their sons.

3. Among the **cautionary legends emphasising discipline**, the most popular one involves an obedient and patient sentinel. A discussion on the militaar.net forum reveals that a similar cautionary legend was widespread among men both in the Soviet army and the Estonian Defence Forces. Depending on the version of the story, not leaving one's post could earn a sentinel either corporal's epaulettes or a release from the service.

> Urban legends are also spread in the army. In the Estonian Defence Forces, one of the most frequently told stories was the one about promotion to corporal:
>
> A private, while on sentinel duty, felt a strong urge to relieve himself. For some reason the communications were down and so he heroically endured it until he eventually soiled his pants. But since he wouldn't leave his post, regardless of the severe distress, he was promoted to corporal.
>
> During the early days you wouldn't even think about the fact that probably every man who had been in the army had heard the story… And it is always told as if it happened last year…
>
> Another popular tale: A sentinel was banging some woman, a kitchen worker, according to the most popular version, in a checkpoint. He got

caught, but since he had his rifle on his back during the entire act, it was overlooked, or he got away with a more lenient punishment.

This story was very likely told already in the Russian army?

If anyone can recall any other urban legends that circulated in the army, please let me know.

(LeBon, militaar.net, 2009)

In addition to the above legend about the unwavering sentinel, users recounted several other stories about discipline which follow a simple moral – whatever you do, sleeping at your post or leaving it can have unwelcome consequences. The contents of these legends vary only in minor details: a sentinel or an orderly[9] falls asleep on watch and the enemy (criminals, darker-skinned people from mountainous regions, Finns) cut the throats of the entire unit or battalion in their sleep. The posts reveal that these tales are known among veterans of the Afghanistan war, but also among men who served in the Soviet army and were stationed in Crimea, the Kola Peninsula, and around Leningrad (present-day St. Petersburg) in the 1970s and 1980s. The following post, however, suggests that the same stories that once circulated in the Soviet army, were also told among conscripts of the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF), whereas the narrator himself classifies the tale as a legend.

Well, in the EDF we were told the following legend, especially when we started out as orderlies, that on the Russian side in Afghanistan an orderly once dozed off in a tent or barracks, and militants from the Taliban happened to come, stabbed everyone to death through their ear with a rifle cleaning rod, except the orderly. When he finally woke up and saw what had happened, he at once activated his self-destruct button.

And the story's underlying moral is that one must never fall asleep while on watch.

(dude, militaar.net, 2009)

Several forum users in this thread noticed a typical pattern in such narratives: the sentinel or orderly survives, while everyone else is killed. The protagonist

is aptly likened to the famous Russian fairytale character Ivan the Fool, who is always lucky and comes out a winner in adverse situations. This motif of a serendipitous escape or survival appears to be rather characteristic of soldier lore and finds parallels in the tale The Boy(s) Saved by the Snake, where the unit's only survivor is the cook who is currently on his way to feed the snakes (Kalmre 2018). In fact, it is probably true about most cautionary tales regarding discipline shared on the militaar.net forum that the tale repertoire is not only limited to what was told among soldiers of the Estonian army but also includes legends that circulated in military service in general. After all, Estonian soldiers would probably not be scared of Finnish soldiers coming over ice and snow to cut their throats in their sleep while the orderly has dozed off. However, they were familiar with this legend, which most likely stems from the fear rooted in the Winter War or the Continuation War among Russians.

> In an army base in Krasnaya Gorka, Leningrad District, young marines were intimidated with a story that one winter Finnish soldiers crossed the (frozen) sea in a snowstorm to cut the throats of an entire company, because the orderly who was supposed to keep watch had fallen asleep. Well, some dudes bought this as well.
>
> (donnervetter, militaar.net, 2009)

4. Relationships with women and sex during military service

Stories about women and sex tend to be quite common among men isolated from regular living environments and members of the opposite sex. The thread on urban legends on the militaar.net forum highlights some plots of stories that circulate in the army. One of these, for example, was the already mentioned story about a sentinel having sex with a female army cook. Soldiers tend to be quite inventive in these sensitive situations but are sometimes punished for indecent behaviour. Among these tales is a rumour, which was widespread even in the Soviet army, about a substance secretly added to soldiers' drinks to lower the young men's libido.

> I think there was also this odd claim about a drug mixed into tea and kissel that was supposed to lower your libido. However, no cook or

> medic seemed to know anything about this. At first, I believed the story, but later I no longer did.
>
> (fireman, militaar.net, 2009)

Suppressing and stimulating sexual libido are probably prevalent topics that emerge mainly in military settings and during wars. In the early days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there were rumours of soldiers being given drugs to enhance their sexual urges. In addition, violence against women has been utilised as a weapon to dominate Ukraine.

5. Tales ridiculing Soviet propaganda

Estonian conscripts were generally highly sceptical about the Soviet authorities and about propaganda. Back in the Soviet period, propaganda entailed idealising the Soviet regime over Western countries, and Russian propaganda continues to operate on the opposition of *Russkiy Mir* and the West to this day. The following tale, told on militaar.net, is possibly the most outlandish rumour that circulated in the Soviet army:

> An elderly man once told me that when they were stationed on submarines, they were at one point prohibited from using newspaper in the toilet – it would all be released into the water and the imperialists could pick up the paper and uncover all their secrets. As a boy, I quite believed this.
>
> (LeBon, militaar.net, 2009)

Compared to the material that could be categorised as urban legends in the first three thematic groups, there are not many examples of the tales of the fourth and fifth themes. We can only assume that the topic of sexuality was perhaps too intimate (obscene stories were generally avoided in a publicly accessible forum). Regarding one text, I was not entirely certain whether it could be categorised as an urban legend, as it might have been a mediated account of a real-life event. The propaganda topic is also rarely discussed, probably owing to the complexity and general lack of interest in the subject. It is fair to conclude that Soviet propaganda is more effectively ridiculed through soldiers' humour.

6. Legends about 'Cultural Others' in the Soviet army

The above discussion revealed that Soviet army bases were melting pots for different nationalities and cultures, based on ideology and planning. The 'Cultural Others' depicted in these tales were typically darker-skinned, uneducated, ignorant people with odd food and sexual preferences. A stereotypical motif of these tales was that the men were usually conscripted when they came down from their mountain regions to the village to buy salt. These 'Cultural Others' were often described using derogatory names such as blacks, *uryuks* (dried apricots), *churka*s, mountain sons, etc. At the same time, in the Soviet army, Estonians were called by names like *nemets* (Rus. German), Fritz, *kuratik*, fascist, etc. (see Tammer 2020, 44–47).

> Here's another legend about churkas: a brother was serving his second year in the army when he received a letter from home announcing the birth of his son and rejoiced. When others tried to explain to him the duration and process of having a child, he would shrug it off, saying there's no problem, his father probably intervened because he had to do military service.
>
> But in our group, it happened for real, the churka's entire family arrived at the army base fence, they bribed the commando chief and celebrated back at the encampment for several nights. The guy brought us party food – smoked veal in sheep casing, some horse meat jelly, ham, etc. Everything was made from horse meat or mutton. In any case, all this food was really delicious. In addition, of course, there were some kinds of green sticky balls, some of which stuff was taken and mixed with tobacco, then small green grains that you were supposed to put under your tongue, and raw leaves of dried blossoms that were used to prepare goat foot. Well, this guy got so much of this stuff that half the army base had ample supplies for months.
>
> (AddressUnknown, militaar.net, 2009)

Conclusion

Many of the legends explored here and rumours related to them have spread outside soldiers' group lore and represent men's perceptions more broadly (tanks sunk in bogs or weapons hidden in haybarns, war planes at the bottoms of lakes). The overarching keyword for this kind of men's lore is military sentiment.

In general, one can notice that these tales of different origins, circulating in different times and contexts and narrated across generations, were told as real-life stories (personal experience narratives) portraying military service, wartime experiences or other topics associated with weapons and ammunition. In these tales resonates the excitement of discussing war as an event of a distant past.

The tales describe and reinforce gender stereotypes, defining masculinity in a manner preferred by men. They suggest models of behaviour and express dreams of masculinity in the most general sense. At the same time, these tales, which could be considered urban legends, both prohibit and endorse specific gender behaviours and describe conduct culturally preferred among men: a rush for adventure and adrenaline, power, manly strength and resilience, cunning, intelligence, and standing up against evil.

The protagonists of the stories about conscripts are generally soldiers at the lowest level of military hierarchy who navigate their circumstances successfully and are often even rewarded. The recollections of men who served in the Soviet army, and legends in general, represent the mentality and mindset of a soldier enlisted in the army of a foreign country and ideology: military service is viewed as a waste of time, it has to be endured/survived, but at the same time everything that this kind of life has to offer has to be exploited for one's own good. Quite unchanging in time have been the stories about evading military service, reflecting a reluctance to serve the army of a foreign power. This was true during the period under imperial Russian occupation, and also in the Soviet army. However, several tales reflect legendary justice wherein cowards and self-harmers get their punishment.

Intriguingly, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, several legends characteristic of men's and military lore are universal and known even among the conscripts of the Estonian Defence Forces today. The stereotypical perceptions of soldiers of southern ethnicities and the primary motifs of these tales are not exclusive to Estonians but reflect more broadly Grand Russian colonialist

attitudes. The plots and motifs of the second, third, and fourth thematic categories potentially also overlap with Soviet soldier legends. To what degree, and specifically how, is yet to be analysed once a study of Russian soldier lore is published in the future.

This rather sparse material that the author has so far had access to reflects the more important experiences, dreams, beliefs, ideas, and practices channelled in men's stories. However, for future perspectives, it is probably worth elaborating on the subject and exploring some specific topic of military legends in more detail, possibly entailing an analysis of memories and soldiers' humour, should additional material become available.

Notes

[1] The Afghanistan war was a civil conflict in which Soviet forces fought on the side of the Afghanistan People's Democratic Party between 1979 and 1989. The US, Great Britain, and others fought on the side of mujahideen against the Soviet Union. See https://et.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%B5ukogude-Afganistani_s%C3%B5da. According to unconfirmed information, 36 conscripts from the Estonian defence forces were killed in this conflict (Sildam 1999).

[2] See the lecture titled "Ghost of Kyiv, White Tights and spring man. Eastern European Wartime rumours in comparative perspective" by Petr Janeček at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgJ-pG6QV-0. See also *Wikipedia*, "Ghost of Kyiv", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_of_Kyiv.

[3] The material is held in the Estonian Folklore Archives, collection RKM I 22. For a feel of the period, see also the small 24-page publication *Vahva punasõduri ustaav* ('The Brave Red Soldier's Code'), published by Tungal Publishers in 1992.

[4] Material held in the manuscript collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives EFA I 90 and audio-recordings in ERA MD 493–509, see also ERA KK 352 "On Military Folklore in the Estonian Defence Forces".

[5] Material taken from threads or chatrooms such as Urban Legends; see https://www.militaar.net/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=169251&hilit=linnalegendid#p169251 and "Exploding pens and other gadgets" https://www.militaar.net/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=10189&hilit=l%C3%B5hkevad+sulepead#p10189, also "Ways to avoid military service" https://www.militaar.net/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=3142&sid=6b58d6630702e86bab67e93ca7b08e8f, etc.

[6] See Tammer 2010: 20–22, 51–55, and especially the Special Issue on *dedovshchina* of *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies (Dedovshchina: From Military to Society)*, 2004, no. 1. https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/190.

[7] 'Ways to avoid military service', see https://www.militaar.net/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=3142&sid=6b58d6630702e86bab67e93ca7b08e8f.

[8] Other cases and more detailed comments on this legend can be found in my soon-to-be published manuscript *Küüned süldis. Populaarsemad 20. ja 21. sajandi kuulujutud ja legendid* (Nails in Meat Jelly: Popular Rumours and Legends of the 20th and 21st Centuries). The manuscript is in the author's possession.

[9] Est. *päevnik*, (Rus. *Дневальный*) was a soldier who kept order and stood sentinel at the barracks. He usually did not carry a rifle or any other firearm but only a cold weapon (a knife or a dagger). A sentinel, on the other hand, guarded objects of military importance and carried a firearm. (Information by Vahur Kalmre, who served in the Soviet army in 1975–1976.)

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