

## Value-meaning sphere of the population of local armed conflict areas: psychological analysis

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### Annotation

**Introduction.** Direct participation in risky and traumatizing events, such as local armed conflicts, has a certain effect on the psyche not only of the participants in hostilities, but also of the civilian population, who remained to live and work in the conflict zone. The purpose of our study is to obtain empirical data on the value-sense sphere of the population of the areas of local armed conflicts, that is, living directly in the epicenter of military events. **Methods.** The sample consisted of 211 people aged 21–53 years, including: 67 men and 144 women. A conversation and associative experiment were used. **Results.** It was revealed that the fear of death leads the population to the realization of meaning-life values, prompts to determine the most important in their lives. Peaceful residents depending on their stay in the territories with a high degree of combat intensity experience unfavorable well-being, decrease in activity, deterioration of mood and depressive states, unproductive behavioral strategies prevail in them, which influences priority life goals, evaluation of the current period of life. **Discussion.** During an armed conflict, the meaning of life of people who live in the epicenter of war is, first of all, in survival and preservation of the family. People mostly live one day at a time, not really thinking about their future, and they are more concerned about the future of their children. The results obtained by us can be used to develop various directions of psychological assistance to the population of local armed conflicts.

## Keywords

local conflict, armed conflict, value and meaning sphere, war, civilians, values, meanings, fear of death

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## Introduction

War is an extraordinary, extreme environment in which only those who have a high level of adaptive capacity, as well as a quick response to stimuli can survive (Horowitz, 1985). A person who finds himself in a war zone is under the influence of stressors and meets with their incredible "attack": he hears the constant sounds of sirens, replaced by the same unbearable sounds of shelling, experiences constant fear for himself and his loved ones, fear of the unknown; a person is covered with complete helplessness through the understanding of the impossibility of changing something or influencing the situation, and resorts to minute-by-minute monitoring of information channels on the current situation. Even the lull that occurs between firings causes tension and expectation of the worst (Ermine, 2022).

Both Russian and foreign scientists are engaged in the study of psychological consequences of armed conflicts. Thus, among the domestic works V. I. Ekimova and E. P. Luchnikova studied complex psychological trauma as a consequence of extreme stress (Ekimova, Luchnikova, 2020); M. Sh. Magomed-Eminov analyzed modern models of psychological trauma from the point of view of the cultural-activity paradigm (Magomed-Eminov, 2014); V. Y. Rybnikov and A. A. Kuzmenko considered the manifestations of protective and coping behavior under stress in different categories of military personnel (Rybnikov, Kuzmenko, 2013); N. V. Tarabrina and I. S. Khazhuev studied posttraumatic stress and protective and coping behavior in the population living in a long-term emergency situation (Tarabrina, Khazhuev, 2015).

Among foreign researchers, the works of R. M. Bhat et al. who investigated the impact of armed conflict on the mental life of student youth in Kashmir (Bhat et al., 2017); A. Richards, who studied the manifestations of PTSD in IDPs in Colombia Richards et al., (2011); I. A. Gutierrez and A. Adler, identifying the acute stress reactions of adolescents in complex living environments (Gutierrez & Adler, 2022); Y. Wang, examining the impact of distance learning on the mental health of students in conflict countries (Wang, 2023).

The experience of countries faced with the psychological consequences of local armed conflicts has shown that direct participation in risky and traumatic events has a certain effect on the psyche, including on the value-sense sphere not only of the combatants, but also of the civilian population who remained to live and work in the conflict zone.

### ***Purpose of the study***

The purpose of the study is to analyze the psychological consequences of local armed conflicts in relation to the value-sense sphere of civilians.

### ***Theoretical review***

#### ***Value and meaning sphere***

To characterize the value-meaning sphere in scientific discourse such synonymous concepts are used as: "value orientations" (M. Rokich, M. S. Yanitsky), "meaning-life orientations", "motivational and meaning sphere", "meaning formations" (A. G. Asmolov), "personal meanings" (A. N. Leontiev), "generalized meaning formations" (B. S. Bratus), "meaning field" (G. V. Birenbaum, B. V. Bratus), "meaning field" (G. V. Birenbaum, B. V. Zeigarnik), "meaning-life strategies" (I. V. Abakumova, E. N. Ryadinskaya, A. A. Levshina, L. Yu. Krutoleva), "meaning-forming strategies" (P. N. Ermakov), "operational meanings" (V. V. Znakov).

Thus, V. A. Kutyrev states that "based on the common core of the concepts "meaning-life orientation", "type", "paradigm" (sometimes "attitude"), we can use these concepts as synonyms" (Kutyrev, 1990, p. 116). A. Maslow (Maslow, 1970) does not separate such concepts as values and value orientations, motivation and needs, and V. Frankl (Frankl, 1982) identifies values and meanings of personality. For these scientists, these are aspects of the same phenomenon.

The value and meaning sphere is represented through the central formation of personality, its basic core, and includes two components – personal values and the system of personal meanings, which sets the direction of life activity.

The concept of "meaning-life orientation" is identified with the concept of "value orientation" in the segment of meaning-life values. Meaning-life orientation is a kind of realized at the level of preferences orientation to a certain number of highly significant

values-meanings (Roshchin, 2010). Meaning-life orientations are associated with the test of meaning-life orientations (SZHO) by D. A. Leontiev (Leontiev, 2006).

A similar concept of "meaning-positive concept" is found in a number of works by other authors (Zelenkova, 1988; Gumnitsky, 1981; Nemirovsky, 1990; Palm, 1998). "Meaning-life concept" is an analog of the concept of "understanding of the meaning of life" or "representation of the meaning of life". For example, the authors distinguish only two concepts of the meaning of life - religious-idealistic and materialistic (Gumnitsky, 1981).

Identification and differentiation of meaning-life orientations and meaning-life concepts are attempts to solve the question about the unity of the value and meaning sphere.

Under meaning-life strategies we understand a stable system of personal meanings of an individual formed in the course of ontogenesis, which allows optimizing or minimizing the subject's activity in relations with reality and manifested in the attitude to the goal, process and result of activity, as well as in the attitude to life and self (Abakumova, Ryadinskaya, 2017).

By values in this study we understand the motives of activity and behavior. A person's orientation in the world and aspiration to achieve certain goals strictly correlate with the values included in the personal structure. This definition was adhered to by B. S. Bratus, L. S. Vygotsky, A. N. Leontiev, G. Allport, S. L. Rubinstein, V. V. Stolin, V. Frankl) (Bitter, 2014).

### *Local armed conflict*

To further illuminate the category "local armed conflict" we will consider a number of concepts that will help characterize the essence of the phenomenon under study: "war", "conflict", "internal armed conflict", "civil war".

In the studies of R. Barthes, K. Marx, F. Nietzsche, A. Schopenhauer, war is defined as confrontation, struggle, conflict and is considered as one of the factors of impact on personality, society (Zhurba, 2022).

Conflict is a socio-psychological phenomenon, complex and multidimensional, caused by various reasons and motives. They can be psychological, economic, political, value, religious and unite different parties such as individuals, social groups, national-ethnic communities, states and groups of countries (Alenevsky, 2017).

Internal armed conflict is an extreme form of resolving contradictions between military and political groups within a country, when both sides actively use military force (Abakumova, Ryadinskaya, 2017).

The current wars are called hybrid wars because they include means of "hard" and "soft" force, military and information - a combination that has been present in one way or another in all wars at different times. Hybrid warfare is a modern military strategy that combines the simultaneous application of conventional militarized forces with the use of irregular formations, cyberspace operations, as well as information operations and

means of economic and diplomatic pressure on the enemy. Modern wars are shifting the center of gravity from the physical force component, which prevails in traditional wars, to the mental and informational components.

The 2000s were characterized by a number of political, economic, demographic crises. Natural disasters, economic cataclysms and outbreaks of military conflicts were observed all over the planet, environmental problems were aggravated and various diseases spread among people. For example, for the first time in many years, the majority of American citizens feel insecure and are in a state of constant anxiety and depression or become aggressive criminals. As a consequence, contradictions between the need to adopt new life values and distrust of the value paradigm offered by society are manifested in the youth environment (Berk & Asarnow, 2015).

### *Armed conflicts and the value-sense sphere of personality*

A person realizes meaning-life values only "in the face of death" (Heidegger, 2007). The fear of death prompts a person to rise above the ordinary, above himself, to determine the most important thing in his life. The very tragic human existence emphasizes the value of conscience, freedom, teaches a person to be resolute in achieving life goals. M. Heidegger's inherently humanistic philosophy is aimed at harmonious human existence in the world, creating conditions for human creativity and self-sufficiency.

Participation of servicemen in combat operations has a significant impact on the change of their value and meaning sphere, leads them to rethinking of life orientations, basic values and meanings. Psychological testing of servicepersons who experienced combat stress showed that they perceived their life as devoid of meaning, in general they were dissatisfied with their existence, and the ongoing events of peaceful life did not interest them and did not cause an emotional reaction (Utyuganov, 2010).

Similar tendencies were noted in the study of N. V. Yakushkin (2006), who studied the value and meaning characteristics of soldiers who participated in combat operations in Afghanistan and underwent combat stress. The soldiers had a feeling of dissatisfaction with life, they seemed disconnected from the general flow of life. Interest in the future was low because they were not sure about it, and in the present, the respondents did not get satisfaction from self-actualization. The findings of these studies indicate violations in the value and meaning sphere of servicepersons with posttraumatic stress disorder, which are manifested in unstructured value orientations, uncertainty of values or their absence, and perception of life as devoid of meaning (Yakushkin, 2006).

For example, the transformation of the value-sense sphere occurred among residents as a result of the military actions in the Chechen Republic.

As a result of the hostilities, many Chechens and their relatives were jeopardized: they lost relatives and homes and became disabled. Creating and maintaining peace between peoples has become an important condition for the well-being of every Chechen (Tagirova, 2013).

Residents of areas with an intense degree of shelling experience unfavorable well-being, decreased activity, deterioration of mood and depressive states (Ryadinskaya, 2018). In such extreme conditions, residents are more likely to use unproductive behavioral strategies: emotional coping and avoidance. All this affects their ego-, group- and socio-centers, priority life goals, assessment of the current period of life, understanding of the past and sense of responsibility for successes and failures.

Socio-political factors influence the change of political order and determine the features and level of social development in a particular historical period (Novak, 1994). If a society experiences some crisis processes, there is a revision of life values of the young generation (Banach, 2006). Modern psychological studies pay special attention to the long-term effects of wars on children and adolescents, who may face unexpected traumatic events, as well as long-term adverse development of them, which may be the reason for the formation of unproductive behavioral strategies (Husain, 1998). Typically, adolescents experiencing war suffer from stress, depression, anxiety, PTSD, loss of identity, closing in on themselves, choosing voluntary social isolation, and antisocial behavior. All of these manifestations, according to researchers, are "normal reactions to abnormal events" (Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003).

Psychological traumas suffered by adolescents during the war have lasting effects on their psyche and can be an obstacle in future life, choice of goals and life strategies (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006; Allport, Vernon & Lindzey, 1970). Lack of resources to provide basic needs (shelter, water, food, education, rights, etc.); broken family relationships (loss, separation, displacement); stigmatization, discrimination, violence; and a pessimistic outlook on life (experiencing loss, grief, destruction) affect adolescents' attitudes toward life and meaning-life choices (Smith, 2001).

During the war period, adolescents have acute emotional reactions to what is happening, emotional swings, hysterics, overexcitement, stupor, fear, etc. Under the influence of dramatic events, the ability to empathize may be lost and derealizations may occur as a protective reaction of the psyche. Those adolescents who are safe away from the hostilities experience guilt or a "survivor's complex".

Emotional resilience helps individuals cope with the negative experiences they have had, allows them to adjust to new realities, and accept difficulties as temporary. In addition, this ability can influence decision making under severe life stressors (Kaplan, Turner, Norman & Stillson, 1996).

War is uncertainty, as well as the destruction of life plans and the future of the individual, which can cause anxiety and confusion not only in adults, but also in children and adolescents. A study by K. Zhurba (2022) found that adolescents experiencing armed conflict suffer from stress, depression, anxiety, loss of identity, shutting down, choosing voluntary social isolation and antisocial behavior. The biggest stressors for adolescents are: sirens, bombing and shelling, even if they are far away; panic of adults; sabotage and terrorist attacks of all kinds; curfews and wartime restrictions; destruction of residential buildings; the need to stay in bomb shelters; information about mass violence, captives,

torture, losses. For children under occupation, such stressors are the consequences of war, mass violence, survival in emergency situations, constant threats to life, loss of relatives, risks associated with evacuation, memories (Seino, 2008). The formation of meaning-life values is a condition for the survival of adolescents during the war, because their realization allows to form emotional stability, allows to plan life and take into account the experience of survival of past generations in the conditions of war, while creating their own experience of survival (Zhurba, 2022).

## Methods

As part of the theoretical understanding of the problem of the impact of local armed conflicts on the value-thought sphere of civilians, we conducted a structured conversation and an associative experiment, in which 211 people participated:

- 95 people living in areas of intensive shelling (Group 1);
- 116 respondents from low-fire areas (Group 2).

The age of respondents ranged from 21 to 53 years old, the majority (64%) had higher education, 67 men and 144 women.

During the interview, residents were asked questions about their plans for the future, goals in life, difficulties in meeting basic needs, attitudes towards restricted movement, the possibility of changing their place of residence due to the armed conflict.

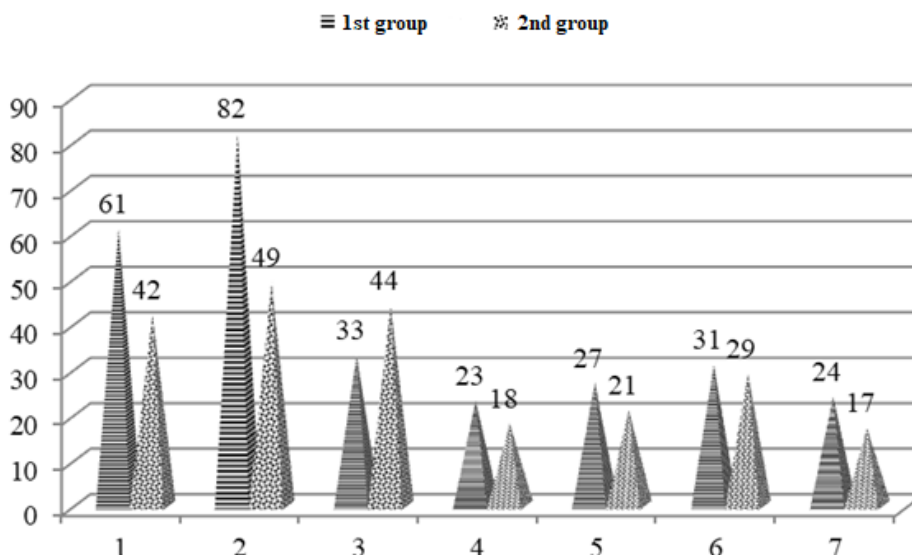
## Results

The results of the interview, and more precisely the expression of the respondents' answers revealed in the course of the interview, are presented in Figure 1.

During the interview it was found that the majority of residents (61%) from the areas of intensive shelling have a blurred view of their future (and the goal is the same, almost all of them – to survive. For example, respondents said: *"It will be as it will be"*, *"We'll live – we'll see"*, *"I don't guess what will happen next"*, *"I just live"*, *"I don't expect anything good from life, I just go with the flow"*, *"I'd like to live until morning - that's the whole life"*, *"We don't plan anything with our family, we live as it turns out"*. Many residents (39%) said that they are most worried about children whose lives are deprived of basic conditions for development - education is in a distance format, communication with peers is limited, and there is a constant threat to life. The most common phrases were: *"What our children have seen in these ten years"*, *"We want our children to study and live in peaceful conditions"*, *"Let our children live for us"* and others.

**Figure 1**

*Expression of respondents' answers revealed in the course of the interview (in %)*



**Note:** 1 – Blurred idea of their future, 2 – Goal – to survive, 3 – Satisfaction with life, 4 – Desire to change place of residence, 5 – Fatigue from uncertainty, 6 – Lack of meaning in life, 7 – Fear of death, Group 1 – residents living in areas of intensive shelling, Group 2 – residents living in areas with little shelling.

About a quarter of respondents (23%) are thinking about leaving for another region of Russia, safer, where it is possible to organize normal life activities for themselves and relatives. This is evidenced by the phrases: "We want to move, we don't have the strength to live like this anymore", "We want a normal life", "We are thinking about changing our place of residence, our children need to study normally and build a future".

One third of respondents (33%) are satisfied with their life at the moment.

27% of respondents noted that they are tired of uncertainty, of living in constant fear, including the fear of losing someone from their relatives. Respondents are more concerned about the lives of family members than their own, and this trend was especially evident in the responses of people over 40 years of age.

Residents from safer neighborhoods (areas that have not been shelled much, where educational institutions are still working) have more optimistic answers, although they do not differ much from the previous ones. The majority of respondents (62%) hope that the war will soon be over and it will be possible to establish their lives; respondents do not think about tomorrow, preferring to live in the present.

18% of respondents from this group dream of settling their lives in another, safer place. The respondents also believe that they lack material resources to realize their plans,



as the opportunities of the region where they live are limited. About half of the residents of this group (44%) are satisfied with their lives.

It should be noted that respondents have a fear of death, clearly stated by 24% of residents of the first group and 17% - of the second group.

### ***Results of the associative experiment***

To investigate subjective semantic fields of words formed and functioning in human consciousness, as well as the nature of semantic relations of words within a semantic field, we used the method of associative experiment. The associative experiment acts as one of the most reliable and effective methods providing access to the study of knowledge and consciousness structures (Belyanin, 2009).

Respondents were offered to write associations to the words "life" and "war". It should be noted that the associations of residents are diverse in nature. We have generalized the associations of residents and grouped them into certain clusters. The results of generalization and grouping are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Results of the associative experiment*

Words	Associations	
	Group 1	Group 2
Life	close, relatives (39%);	birth, joy, love (27%);
	existence (26%);	way, road, movement, meaning (24%);
	process, path, mission (19%);	family and relatives (16%);
	instant, moment, second (9%);	existence, fate (15%);
	beginning, miracle (7%).	struggle, warmth, air, beginning (11%);
		uncertainty (7%).

GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Words	Associations	
	Group 1	Group 2
	death (25%);	death (24%);
	pain, loss, separation (22%);	people (22%);
	weapons, destruction (15%);	weapons (18);
War	grief (19%);	victims, losses (15%);
	fear, death, (11%);	horror, grief, death (12%);
	fascists (5%);	destruction (6%);
	isolation, chaos (3%).	politics (3%).

The results show that respondents of both groups describe the concept of "life" in a positive modality. Residents note that in extreme conditions of existence, when deadly shells fly over you, life acquires a special value, because it can be interrupted at any second.

In the first group (respondents living in areas of intensive shelling), as we can see, the majority of respondents associate their life with their relatives (39%), which was reflected in the interview. A quarter of respondents (26%) noted that life for them is just existence ("the main thing is to survive"), which is most likely related to difficult living conditions. 19% of residents consider life to be a certain process and mission that requires them to be included and respond in a timely manner (explanations of the experiment participants).

"War" for a significant part of the respondents of the first group (25%) is perceived as something terrible, leading to death, causing pain from separation from loved ones, their physical loss (22%). War is grief (19%), fear (15%) and death (11%).

The associations of the respondents of the second group (from areas that have not been shelled much) are somewhat different. Almost a third of residents (27%) consider life as a joyful moment associated with joy and love, almost for a quarter of respondents (24%) life is a meaningful movement, it is a road forward. Family and relatives are also an

important part of life for these people (16%), for some it is a struggle (11%) and for some (11%) it is uncertainty.

The concept of "war", as well as in the first group, has a negative character. Most respondents associate it with death, weapons, victims, horror and destruction.

## Discussion

In an armed conflict, the meaning of life for people living in the epicenter of military events is, above all, survival and preservation of the family. People live one day at a time, not really thinking about their future, but more concerned about the future of their children. For them, war is a real threat to life, a terrible event in which they are forced to become participants.

The assumption that the fear of death leads a person to realize the meaning and life values and encourages him/her to determine the most important thing in his/her life was confirmed.

This is consistent with the studies of other authors who consider similar problems. In some works the analysis of psychological consequences of different degrees of severity in men and women is presented, which showed that men are more resistant to the risk of developing delayed reactions as a response to the impact of stressors, but in the development of the disorder men demonstrate more severe symptomatology than women, they undergo greater transformation of the value and meaning sphere (Tushkova & Bundalo, 2008).

Our findings also confirm the results of research on stress reactions in young mothers from Kabul (Afghanistan). The authors found that women experiencing negative consequences of traumatic events have similar psychological manifestations to those living in shelled areas (Seino, 2008).

Similar results were obtained by the authors examining the relationship between reactions to catastrophes and unemployment. It was found that territorial proximity to the epicenter of events is associated with the manifestation of severe stress reactions and subsequent difficulty in finding a job (Serrano & Leiva-Bianchi & Ahumada & Araque-Pinilla, 2021).

Furthermore, in the context of our study, the findings of a number of scholars studying veterans aged 60 years and older are interesting. Delayed psychological reactions have been found to be prevalent and more likely to provoke depression, substance use disorders, suicide attempts, loss of meaning in life, disbelief in the future, non-suicidal self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Moye & Kaiser & Cook & Pietrzak, 2022).

The obtained results have theoretical and practical significance. With the help of conversation and associative experiment, the range of psychological characteristics of civilians living in the armed conflict, their attitude to life, plans for the future, the presence of goals in life, difficulties in satisfying basic needs was expanded.

## Conclusion

Depending on the stay in the territories with high intensity of hostilities, civilians experience unfavorable well-being, decreased activity, deterioration of mood and depressive states, unproductive behavioral strategies in the form of emotional adjustment and avoidance prevail, which has an impact on priority life goals, assessment of the current period of life, understanding of the past and sense of responsibility for successes and failures. Special attention in modern psychological research is emphasized on the category of civilians in adolescence. They suffer from stress, depression, anxiety, PTSD, loss of identity, closing in on themselves, choosing voluntary social isolation, and antisocial behavior. The traumas suffered by adolescents during war have lasting effects on their psyche and can become an obstacle in future life, choice of goals and life strategies. The meaning of life and the main values for residents living directly in the epicenter of military events are, first of all, survival and preservation of the family. People are concerned about the future of their children. The development of various directions of psychological assistance to this category of population is a prospect for further work.

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**Irina V. Abakumova** – general management of the study, reviewing and editing of the article, final approval of the version for publication.

**Evgenia N. Ryadinskaya** – development of research methodology, preparation of the experiment program, data analysis, visualization of results, preparation of the text of the article.

**Kristina B. Bogrova** – literature analysis, work with scientific sources, data collection, preparation of the primary version of the article, editing of the article.

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### **Conflict of Interest Information**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.