

Their Brothers Went to War: A Review of the Russian Anti-War Podcast *Sisters*

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Abstract

Сёстры (Sisters) is the special 2023 season of the podcast *Привет, ты иноагент* (Hello, You're a Foreign Agent), created by independent journalists Sonya Groysman and Olya Churakova. This season examines the families of Russians whose relatives participated in the war against Ukraine, focusing particularly on the personal testimonies of Russian women whose brothers have been involved in the conflict. It raises pressing questions: How does the choice to go to war affect both the soldiers and their loved ones? What does it mean to oppose the war while someone close to you is fighting? And how do combat experiences transform individuals, influencing what awaits them when they return? Through a series of interviews and reflective commentary, the podcast weaves together a rich tapestry of perspectives on the military, seen through the eyes of women who stand against the war. In doing so, it offers Russian-speaking listeners a space to either recognize their own experiences in these narratives or to gain first-hand insight into the emotional toll of having a loved one engaged in a conflict they vehemently reject.

Keywords

war, trauma, family, Russia, women's voices, family, Russia, women's voices

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Sonya Groysman and Olya Churakova describe their project *Sisters*—a special, fourth season of the podcast *Hello, You're a Foreign Agent*—as ‘a study of the families of Russians who went to war against Ukraine’ (Groysman, 2023). Since its launch in 2021, *Hello, You're a Foreign Agent* has released six seasons and become one of the most discussed independent podcasts in Russia, gaining a wide audience and sparking conversation on social media for its investigative depth and emotional resonance. *Sisters* consists of eight episodes, along with a bonus episode for Patreon subscribers that offers behind-the-scenes insight into the making of the series. Rather than focusing on battlefield events, *Sisters* foregrounds the personal experiences of those left to bear the emotional burden of conflict at home. It follows three women whose brothers fought on the Russian side in Ukraine. Although they oppose the war, their siblings have found themselves on the front lines. *Sisters* captures the profound internal conflict that arises when personal anti-war convictions clash with the painful reality of having a family member in combat. Through their evolving narratives, the season becomes a space for processing trauma—one that unfolds over months, documenting how war shatters destinies and exposes the catastrophic personal tragedies that Russian society has yet to fully confront. Beyond amplifying these voices, *Sisters* serves as a powerful anti-war statement, illustrating how conflict devastates families. By weaving together individual stories, the podcast makers seek to make sense of the ongoing events and explore how society might ultimately come to terms with them.

The project examines not only the loss of loved ones but also the profound physical and mental transformations that afflict those who return from war—even when their departure was voluntary. Such personal and familial tragedies often go unnoticed. Thus, *Sisters* invites listeners to explore alternative narratives that markedly diverge from the state-sanctioned, often idealized, portrayals of war—a perspective reinforced by commemorations such as Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War and the enduring myth of Soviet heroism in contemporary Russia (Kaminer, 2022, 6). Moreover, in their study, the creators attempt to understand the motivations behind enlisting in a conflict against a neighbouring state—a decision that may seem incomprehensible to many—by uncovering details that often cast a harsh light on contemporary societal conditions. Factors such as the need to pay off loans, boredom, or fear of conscription emerge as recurring themes. There is no optimistic message here; rather, *Sisters* presents the stark, unembellished realities. At the end of each episode, the creators continue to encourage listeners to share the special season with friends, believing that the stories of its ‘heroes’ might inspire someone to reconsider their stance on the conflict.

The project originated with a message from a listener of *Hello, You're a Foreign Agent*, who was deeply moved by an episode about familial disputes over the war and the resulting fractures in relationships—a reality familiar to many Russians

whose families are divided, not only geographically (with many having Ukrainian roots) but also ideologically (with some supporting the war and others opposing it). This young woman, who later appeared in *Sisters* under the pseudonym Sasha, revealed that her brother had joined the Wagner Group—a Russian mercenary organization that has conducted military operations worldwide on behalf of the Russian government, according to the BBC News (2023). As an anti-war advocate grappling with deep internal conflict, she inquired whether Churakova and Groysman would be interested in sharing her story in their podcast. The creators promptly agreed, subsequently gathering several more narratives, initially planning a single special episode. The subject proved so expansive that it eventually culminated in eight episodes, following the unfolding stories of three families over nine months and exploring various scenarios concerning the futures of soldiers and their loved ones after the war. In Russia, where openly discussing the ongoing conflict can be perilous—since such discourse may be interpreted as discrediting the military—the female protagonists are anonymized. Often, parts of their testimonies are modified to protect their identities, and they are referred to by pseudonyms. Nonetheless, the season remains an authentic oral testimony that records and preserves the communicative memory of the conflict, presenting genuine conversations with real people. In doing so, the authors capture a significant chapter of Russian history, voiced through the experiences of ordinary women.

The first narrative centres on Sasha, whose brother Gleb went missing, only to later be revealed as a volunteer fighter with the Wagner Private Military Company in Ukraine. Sasha recounts their shared childhood and tries to make sense of how her brother came to embrace violence, and why the rest of their family supported his decision to go to war. One episode features excerpts from a three-hour conversation between Sasha and Gleb, secretly recorded by her. The podcast-makers openly acknowledge the ethical difficulty of including these excerpts. Gleb was unaware he was being recorded, raising serious questions around privacy and informed consent (Episode 1). Nevertheless, the imperative to document his first-hand account, and thus shed light on the motives of the Wagner Group ultimately outweighed those concerns. The text was anonymized primarily to protect Sasha, who remained in Russia, from potential danger. Initially, the authors considered having an actor recite Gleb's speech from the transcript, but they abandoned this idea, recognizing that the delivery was just as important as the words themselves. In the final version of the episode, only voice distortion was used, ensuring anonymity while preserving what the creators described as 'an important historical document' that captures, in chilling detail, accounts of looting, torture, and murder.¹ Although difficult to listen to, this

¹ Furthermore, the season earns its status as a historical document by chronicling not only the Russo-Ukrainian war but also concurrent events in Russia at the time of recording, such as the attempted military coup by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a mercenary leader who led the Wagner Group.

recording offers a rare and revealing glimpse into the mindset of a mercenary soldier. Sasha says (my translation here and throughout):

‘I really wanted to draw him out—to understand: Who are we saving? From whom? And why, if we’re saving, are we also killing? These were questions I couldn’t make sense of, and still can’t. But it was important for me to at least try—to hear something from him that might quiet the endless loop of thoughts in my head.’

Gleb, for his part, attempts to justify his actions—often in ways that defy moral logic:

‘It’s just a job. The same way you kill people, you save them—you stop peaceful civilians from being murdered, and cities and monuments from being destroyed. You simply don’t let it happen. Yes, by killing others.’

Yet at times, his defences fall away, and some of his statements strike a chord: ‘Because I’m messed up. Our minds are gone, it’s all just sick, broken stuff’. Their exchange illustrates the collision of two distinct worlds: that of the sister, a simple girl who champions the intrinsic value of human life, and that of the brother, a hired killer returned from war, whose moral views drastically diverge from conventional standards:

‘—I don’t know about you, but ever since I was a kid, I’ve been told that war is a terrible thing.

—For me, war is normal.’

In a similar vein, the cover in a child-like style, designed by illustrator Anya Samoylova for the special season and each individual episode, contrasts vividly with the narrative’s distressing content. The pastel pink hues and the floral-and-tank pattern on the headscarf embody the disconnect between the sisters’ worldview and how the world is perceived by those involved in military conflict.

The podcast’s messages are powerfully reinforced through its carefully crafted sound design by Ildar Fattakhov. Background music is layered to reflect and underscore the speakers’ experiences. For instance, when Sasha recalls her brother’s influence on her musical taste during childhood, a song by the band she mentions plays softly in the background. Similarly, when Gleb talks about the music they listened to on the front lines, the inclusion of that track brings the listener closer to the lived experience being described. Archive is also integrated into the soundscape, such as a recording of Yevgeny Prigozhin’s speech about recruiting prisoners to fight for Wagner in the war. These excerpts ground the narrative in its political and historical context, offering a fuller portrait of the conflict by presenting rhetoric from both the opposition and supporters of the war. Ambient music is used with care, often to heighten the eerie atmosphere surrounding the realities of war. These sound cues not only enhance the emotional tone but also create smoother transitions between speakers—particularly between the podcast’s protagonists and its journalists—resulting in a cohesive and richly layered listening experience.

The second narrative in *Sisters* recounts the experiences of Masha and her cousin Kolya. Disenchanted with the monotony of small-town life, Kolya enlisted in the war, only to return home after sustaining injuries. Although he initially refused to go back to the front, he was later reactivated during mobilisation. Kolya recounted his wartime experiences to Masha, explaining that, lacking proper military training, he became 'the man who, after the battle, collected the remains—body parts—of his comrades in arms' (Episode 5). After returning from the war a second time, Kolya faced trial for desertion. The severe post-traumatic stress he endured, compounded by the trial, eroded his mental stability, and led to alcohol abuse and aggressive behaviour. Following the recording of the first episode of their story, Kolya, in a drunken state, fatally stabbed his grandmother in front of his mother. The news of this tragedy shocked both the podcast creators and the episode's subject, Masha, who initially contemplated withdrawing her participation, but hoped that her story might dissuade others from going to war. Beyond illuminating individual fates, *Sisters* demonstrates that the system is failing to support everyone in need. With an overwhelming number of returnees, there appears to be insufficient assistance for reintegration into society, a shortfall that can lead to tragic consequences, including an increase in crime. According to Bloomberg (2024), citing statistics from the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, in 2023 the number of crimes committed by military personnel unrelated to active combat increased by over 20%, Kolya's story being just one of many.

Karina, the central figure in the third narrative, is a psychotherapist who works with war veterans suffering from PTSD. Despite her professional expertise, she could not prevent her brother, Anton, from going to the front. *Sisters* traces Karina's struggles to come to terms with this reality and explores the far-reaching consequences of Anton's decision on his wife and children, through her eyes. As the war reshapes Anton—altering his values, demeanour, and relationships, the season follows his trajectory to its tragic end: his death during a so-called 'meatstorm'—a frontal infantry assault on enemy fortifications, carried out despite heavy losses in manpower. Thus, *Sisters* explores two potential outcomes: the trauma of losing a loved one, and the equally harrowing experience of their return, only to be irrevocably changed—often with consequences that can be fatal for those closest to them.

The podcast transcends a mere chronicle of the Russo-Ukrainian war by delving into earlier events as well: it intertwines past and present, to reveal the cyclical nature of history. For instance, it presents the story of Uma, whose father fought in Chechnya during the 1990s and returned as a fundamentally altered man—a 'creature', as Uma describes him—with a fractured psyche (Episode 6). Her story offers a grim forecast for Russians in the post-war period: returning loved ones may be burdened by PTSD, alcoholism, and a lack of rehabilitation opportunities, making

the transition to peacetime exceedingly difficult. Such issues, often relegated to the private tragedies of individual families, receive scant attention in mainstream media.

After discussing the interplay between past and present and speculating on post-war Russia's future, the season concludes with an exclusive behind-the-scenes episode for Patreon subscribers. In this finale, the authors respond to listeners' questions, thereby introducing an interactive element that transforms the series into a platform for psychological support for those facing similar challenges. Notably, the authors report that two of the featured women contacted them after the podcast's release, expressing that listening to the stories of others made them feel less isolated and more supported (Efimova, 2023).

Regrettably, the podcast is currently available only in Russian. Some Russian podcasts are being translated, and it would be invaluable to translate this journalistic work as well, allowing foreign listeners to engage with the diverse perspectives of ordinary Russian citizens on the war. Nonetheless, other podcasts abroad explore similar themes for English-speaking audiences. For instance, the 'Eight Fights' (2023) episode of *This American Life* examines a family conflict within a Russian-Ukrainian household—a narrative that is all too common and emblematic of the multifaceted impact of war on families. Another notable example is *Next Year in Moscow* (2023) by *The Economist*, produced in collaboration with the Russian studio Libo/Libo. This podcast presents the stories of a new generation of exiles—Russians who fled following the onset of shelling in Ukraine in 2022—and explores both the origins and potential outcomes of the war.

Even though *Sisters* has not yet been translated into English, its significance remains undiminished. Designed primarily for a Russian audience, the podcast enables listeners to develop a more nuanced understanding of the conflict and its consequences, while also serving as a form of therapeutic practice. It provides an opportunity for individuals to view their own circumstances from an external perspective, thereby facilitating the processing of both personal and collective grief. *Sisters* amplifies the voices of Russian women—specifically, sisters whose brothers have gone to war—complementing the narratives of other anti-war voices featured in Russian-language podcasts. For example, the podcast *Kavachai* (2022), created jointly by Ukrainian Anna Filimonova and Russian Alexey Ponomarev, discusses Russia's war against Ukraine and examines how society might now cope with its aftermath. Similarly, the series *Горизонт планирования завален* (*The Planning Horizon is Swamped*) (Gorizont Zavalen, 2023) features reportage from activists, human rights defenders, and politicians, blending personal reflection with scholarly insight. Additionally, *Sisters* sheds light on earlier historical events—such as the Russian-Chechen war and its profound impact on individual families—in a manner akin to the podcasts *Война, которой не было* (*The War That Never Happened*) (Holod Media, 2023), produced by the international human rights organization

Memorial and *Holod Magazine*, which also draw parallels between the past and the present.

Any work that reveals the essence and consequences of the ongoing military conflict holds significant weight in contemporary Russia. In today's volatile environment, simply releasing such a podcast is an act of courage. As for *Sisters*, its creators have already been labelled 'foreign agents' in July 2021—a designation reflected in the title of their main podcast; this fate is shared by many journalists and human rights activists in Russia.² Despite the podcast's popularity—it was named one of the best podcasts of 2023 by *Meduza* (2024) and its creators received the *Redkollegia* award for their work (Redkollegia, 2023)—it is currently under threat of being banned. It was removed from the popular Russian platform Yandex.Music, and Apple Podcasts demanded that *Hello, You're a Foreign Agent* be taken down from its service.³ According to Churakova and Groysman, these platforms characterized their activities as the dissemination of 'information materials aimed at destabilizing the socio-political situation in Russia', an action they themselves describe as nothing more than an 'act of military censorship' (*Hello, You're a Foreign Agent*, 2025). Nevertheless, the podcast remains accessible on YouTube—despite being blocked in Russia—and on Spotify, though it is similarly inaccessible within the country.

Undeterred, the creators of *Hello, You're a Foreign Agent* continue their work and have even released new material. At the end of 2024, a new special season of the podcast titled *Sisters. Love* was launched, marking a shift from exclusively family narratives to stories of a romantic nature that explore the difficult choices Russian women must confront and the impact of the political situation on personal relationships (Groysman, 2024). The podcast remains dedicated to presenting the stories of ordinary people, providing them with a platform for self-expression and ensuring that their testimonies are preserved in historical memory.

Сёстры (*Sisters*), 2023 Season 4 of the podcast *Привет, ты иноагент* (*Hello, You're a Foreign Agent*). Produced by Sonya Groysman and Olya Churakova, with sound design and original music by Ildar Fattakhov, editorial support from Lena Chesnokova, and artwork by Anya Samoilova. Available at

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/привет-ты-иноагент/id1579350554>.

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² According to Human Rights Watch (2022), 'almost any person or entity, regardless of nationality or location, who engages in civic activism or even expresses opinions about Russian policies or officials' conduct could be designated a foreign agent,' a label tantamount to branding someone a 'spy' or 'traitor.'

³ As of this writing, the podcast remains available on Apple Podcasts.

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