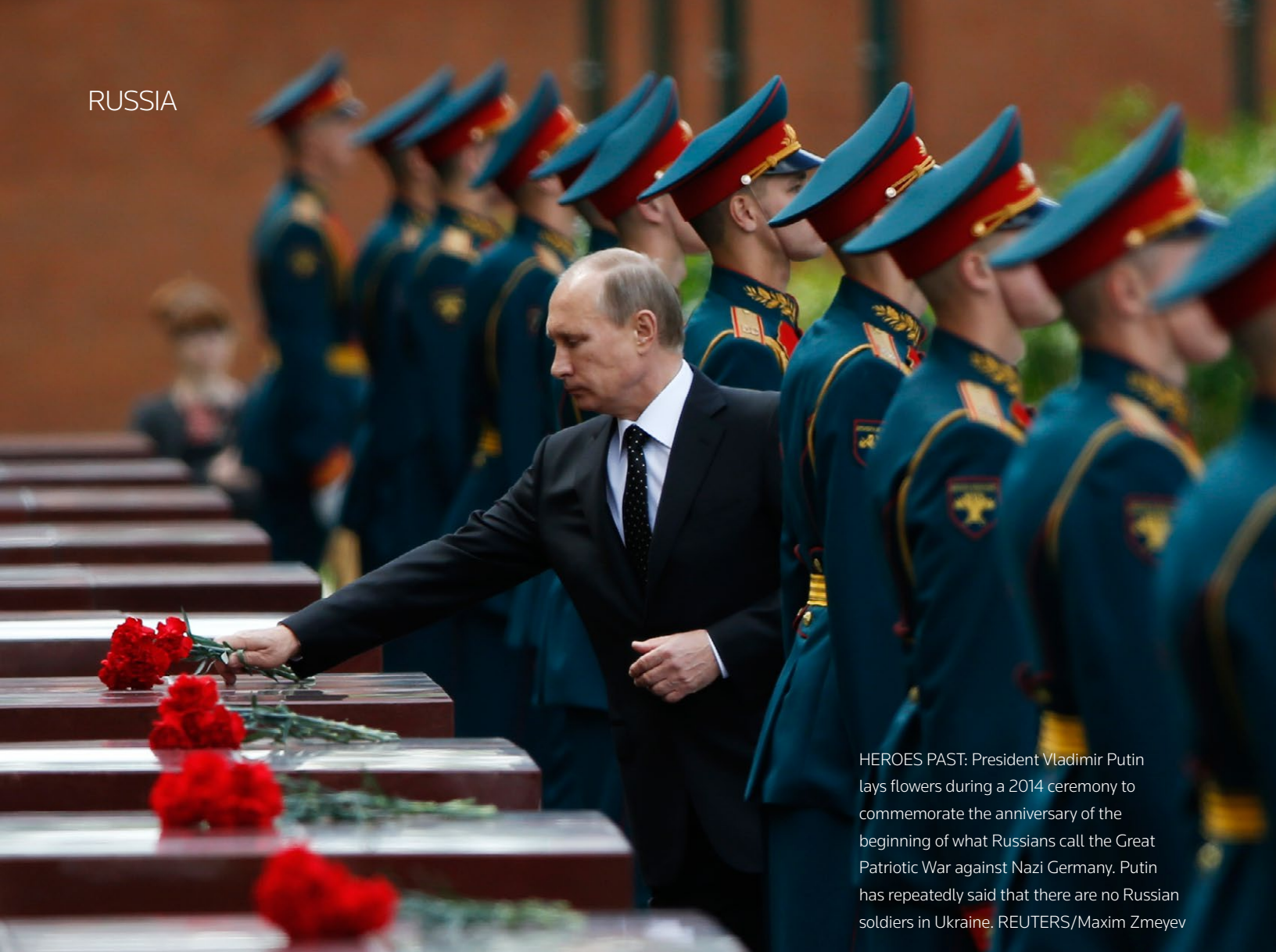


RUSSIA



HEROES PAST: President Vladimir Putin lays flowers during a 2014 ceremony to commemorate the anniversary of the beginning of what Russians call the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany. Putin has repeatedly said that there are no Russian soldiers in Ukraine. REUTERS/Maxim Zmeyev

Some soldiers say they have quit the army because of the war in Ukraine – even though Russia says it has no troops there.

# In Russian ranks, discontent over Ukraine

BY MARIA TSVETKOVA

## RUSSIA DISCONTENT IN THE RANKS

MOSCOW/DONETSK, MAY 10, 2015

Some Russian soldiers are quitting the army because of the conflict in Ukraine, several soldiers and human rights activists have told Reuters. Their accounts call into question the Kremlin's continued assertions that no Russian soldiers have been sent to Ukraine, and that any Russians fighting alongside rebels there are volunteers.

Evidence for Russians fighting in Ukraine – Russian army equipment found in the country, testimony from soldiers' families and from Ukrainians who say they were captured by Russian paratroopers – is abundant. Associates of Boris Nemtsov, a prominent Kremlin critic killed in February, will soon publish a report which they say will contain new evidence of the Russian military presence in Ukraine.

Until now, however, it has been extremely rare to find Russian soldiers who have fought there and are willing to talk. It is even rarer to find soldiers who have quit the army. Five soldiers who recently quit, including two who said they left rather than serve in Ukraine, have told Reuters of their experiences.

One of the five, from Moscow, said he was sent on exercises in southern Russia last year but ended up going into Ukraine in an armoured convoy.

"After we crossed the border, a lieutenant colonel said we could be sent to jail if we didn't fulfil orders. Some soldiers refused to stay there," said the soldier, who served with the elite Russian Kantemirovskaya tank division. He gave Reuters his full name but spoke on condition of anonymity, saying he feared reprisals.

He said he knew two soldiers who refused to stay. "They were taken somewhere. The lieutenant colonel said criminal cases were opened against them but in reality – we called them afterwards – they were at home. They just quit."

Russia's President Vladimir Putin has



AMMUNITION: Spent cartridges at Donetsk airport. Two soldiers told Reuters they quit rather than risk being sent to Ukraine. **REUTERS/BAZ RATNER**

“If our troops were officially there it would be a different story.

Former tank soldier who says he quit over Ukraine

repeatedly denied that Moscow has sent any military forces to help rebels in eastern Ukraine, where clashes and casualties persist despite a ceasefire struck in February. Putin's spokesman has derided such allegations by NATO, Western governments and Kiev. Officials say that any Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine are “volunteers,” helping the rebels of their own free will.

The former Russian soldiers who spoke to Reuters, as well as human rights activists, said some soldiers were fearful of being sent to Ukraine, were pressured into going, or disgruntled at the way they were treated after fighting there.

The former tank soldier from Moscow said he would not have gone to Ukraine voluntarily. “No, what for? That's not our war. If our troops were officially there it would be a different story.”

He said he had been sent to fight in Ukraine last summer and returned to Russia in September when the first peace talks took place. His crew operated a modernised Russian T-72B3 tank, he said.

“(Back in Russia) we were lined up and told that everyone would get a daily allowance, extras for fighting and medals,” he said. But he said that they did not get the extras they expected. “We decided to quit. There were 14 of us.”

The names of nine soldiers who quit the Kantemirovskaya division are mentioned in an exchange of letters between Viktor Miskovets, the head of the human resources department of Russia's Western Military District, and Valentina Melnikova, who runs the Alliance of Soldiers' Mothers Committees, a group based in Moscow.

In the letters, seen by Reuters, human rights workers asked Miskovets to approve the soldiers' resignations – which one soldier told Reuters the military had been unwilling to do. The letters do not mention service in Ukraine.

The soldiers left the service on Dec. 12,



according to a letter signed by Miskovets. He and his deputy did not answer calls.

Three soldiers from the list, contacted by Reuters, confirmed they had quit the service recently but declined to discuss Ukraine.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Defence declined to comment on soldiers quitting the tank unit or being sent to Ukraine.

## FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

In Russia, all men aged between 18 and 27 have to serve 12 months in the military. By law, these conscripts cannot be sent abroad. But according to human rights activists, military officials have been promising conscripts financial incentives to sign contracts that make them professional soldiers. The officials then push the soldiers into going to Ukraine.

Sergei Krivenko, head of a rights group called "Citizen. Army. Rights" and a member of a human rights council created by the Kremlin, has dealt with soldiers' rights since the early 2000s. He said military commanders are trying to find more people who will go to Ukraine voluntarily, "but this is still 'volunteers' in quotation marks, because there is harsh pressure."

Krivenko said commanders take a carrot-and-stick approach: They offer large financial rewards to contract soldiers willing to go to Ukraine. If soldiers refuse, they are told to resign, he said. "You can't criminally prosecute someone for not following the order, because the order itself doesn't exist on paper. It's only oral."

Since 2012, contract soldiers' pay has risen, said Krivenko, who travelled to Murmansk to meet soldiers, about 30 of whom told him they had been to Ukraine. "Now they receive 20, 30, 40,000 roubles a month depending on their rank. Some even get 60,000 a month."

The average wage in Russia is about 30,000 roubles (\$580).

Resignation is not an easy decision for the soldiers, Krivenko said: "Just like others

*Text continues on page 5*

# A burial, but no closure

In October, the Russian military delivered a headless corpse to relatives of Pavel Zhilin. Officials said Zhilin, a paratrooper from the 331st airborne regiment of the 98th division, had been killed during a training exercise in Russia.

The family was sceptical about the military's account. They first became suspicious last summer, when they saw on television paratroopers from Zhilin's company who had been captured by Ukrainians. Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested the soldiers lost their way and entered Ukraine by accident.

But when the family opened the coffin and saw burned and mutilated remains, they were incredulous, said the soldier's godmother. Zhilin's unit was based in Kostroma 300 km (190 miles) north-east of Moscow. She said the family didn't believe either the military's story, or that the corpse was the body of Zhilin.

"I was there," said godmother Elena Denisova. "It wasn't him. I'm 100 percent sure. It's not his body. Not his."

The corpse's feet were three shoe sizes too small, she said. Zhilin's parents declined to comment.

The military insisted that the headless body was the 22-year-old paratrooper, that he had died in Rostov province and that he had not been in Ukraine, family members said.

They said the military death certificate says he

was killed by an exploding shell in Rostov.

"That's not true," Denisova said.

Families of Russians killed in Ukraine are usually awarded compensation of up to 5 million roubles (\$90,000), according to human rights workers. Most families desperately need the money. According to Denisova, Zhilin's family were asked by the military to fill in forms to claim compensation, but refused to do so.

"We tried to explain that if it wasn't our boy, who would you send us the money for?" said Denisova. "We aren't rich people. But we don't want to trade our child."

In November, the military buried the headless body in part of a graveyard in Kostroma reserved for war heroes. Denisova said the body was buried without the permission of relatives, who still reject the military's account.

The graveyard attendant, Lyudmila Kurochkina, said of the young soldiers laid to rest there: "Those boys were brought from Ukraine. Zhilin doesn't have a name (on his grave) because the military buried him, not his parents. His parents don't want to believe their child is there."

Alexei Besfamilny, the officer in charge of the burial, declined to say how the young man had died. "The subject is closed," he said. "It's classified."

*By Maria Tsvetkova*



RESTING PLACE: Three graves in Kostroma, 300 km northeast of Moscow. The army says the soldier in the grave with no name is Pavel Zhilin. His family reject that.

REUTERS/MARIA TSVETKOVA

## Changing control in eastern Ukraine

Clashes between Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces largely died down after the February peace plan and ceasefire; both sides withdrew heavy weapons. But fighting resumed in April, weapons reappeared in key battlegrounds, and the rebels expanded their territory.



C. Inton, G. Cabrera/Reuters Graphics

in Russia, they're paying off apartments, foreign-made cars... The question becomes where do they find the money to pay off debts, to feed their families?"

Reuters could not independently verify Krivenko's account.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Defence declined to comment on Russian involvement in Ukraine, but Putin has made his position clear. On April 16, the president said during a televised question and answer session: "I tell you directly and definitely: There are no Russian troops in Ukraine."

### "FIELD CONDITIONS"

Another soldier who said he quit the army over the Ukraine conflict is a 21-year-old who was a member of a Grad missile unit. The soldier, who asked that he and his unit not be identified, told Reuters that in the summer of 2014 his team took up position about 2 km (one mile) from the Ukrainian border in the Rostov region of southwest Russia. The operation appeared to be an exercise, though the men were ordered to prepare as if for real combat.

"We drove there without insignia. We took off all the buttonholes and stripes. We were told that we did not need them in field conditions."

In early September the men were ordered to fire their rockets at a target "about 17 km" away, "maybe less." It was possible the target was in Ukraine, he said. "I was hoping I did not aim at any people. Or at least that I missed the target."

He said his fellow soldiers told him another battery from his unit had crossed the border and spent 10 days in Ukraine. "I did not understand who was fighting and what for, and the point of it," he said.

While on leave in January, the soldier said, he was unexpectedly summoned back to his unit.

"We were moved to another (artillery) battery that was supposed to go to some exercises in Rostov region. They said they were really big exercises and very big forces



ON GUARD: Members of the armed forces of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic on the outskirts of Donetsk in January. REUTERS/ALEXANDER ERMOCHENKO

were involved," the soldier said.

Although he offered no proof, he said he had no doubt it was related to the conflict in Ukraine. "Of course it was. Why else would we be called off from vacation?"

He and four others decided to quit the army rather than risk being sent to fight in Ukraine. After completing the necessary procedures, they left in March, according to the soldier's account and documents from human rights activists and military prosecutors.

### SPOTTED IN DONBASS

Most Russian soldiers who fought in Ukraine last year – whether volunteers or not – came from Central Russia, the North Caucasus or the Volga region, according to soldiers' accounts, relatives and Russian media. More recently, Reuters reporters in east Ukraine spotted fighters from Siberia, thousands of miles away.

Their appearance lends support to claims that Russian troops from regions closer to Ukraine have become reluctant to join the conflict.

Early this year Asian-looking fighters were seen manoeuvring armoured vehicles and manning checkpoints in Donbass, eastern Ukraine. The fighters turned out to be Buryats, a Mongolian ethnic group from Russian Siberia near Lake Baikal, about 4,500 km from Ukraine.

Dorjo Dugarov, a politician from Buryatiya, a region in southeast Siberia, said a Siberian soldier who had returned from Ukraine had told him that "people from the western part (of Russia) didn't want to go. Their morale has fallen."

Yevgeniy Romanenko, a 39-year-old rebel fighter in east Ukraine, told Reuters that during battles near Debaltseve in February he drove a truck in a convoy that was accompanied by two tanks with Buryat crews. The tank crews provided cover for the truck convoy.

"One of them drove in front of the convoy and the second one behind," Romanenko said at a hospital in Yenakiyev, where he was recovering from shrapnel wounds to his leg.

Asked if they were servicemen from





DESTRUCTION: A member of the armed forces of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic walks near a building destroyed during battles with the Ukrainian armed forces in Vuhlehirsk in February. **REUTERS/MAXIM SHEMETOV**

Russia, Romanenko said: "Yes, that's for sure. The guys were from there. It was clear."

In February, a Buryat soldier also appeared in an interview on a TV station in eastern Ukraine. Popular singer Iosif Kobzon, who is a member of Russia's State Duma, the lower house of parliament, was filmed visiting injured fighters in a hospital in Donetsk, eastern Ukraine's biggest city. Kobzon says he spoke to a soldier who said he was a member of a tank crew from Buryatiya. The Russian independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* later identified the soldier as Dorji Batomunkoyev from military unit 46108 based in Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatiya.

Rebels in Ukraine said the Buryat were not soldiers sent by Russia but volunteers. "We have volunteers from the Russian Federation," Vladimir Kononov, the Ukrainian rebel defence minister, told Reuters in early March. "This tankman could have left the army before he came here."

Reuters could not reach Batomunkoyev. His mother Sesegma, contacted by telephone, confirmed that her son had served in the army and been injured in Ukraine. She visited him in a hospital after he was transferred back to Russia. She declined to say whether he had been ordered to go to Ukraine or had volunteered.

"He did not say he was going," she said.

"He called me on February 19 and shouted 'Mum, I got burnt in a tank.' And that's it."

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