

# Russian men, dying in war, leave many families sad, angry and silent

By Robyn Dixon

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When Yevgeny Chubarin told his mother he was joining the Russian army to fight against Ukraine, she cried and begged him not to go. But his exhilaration shone through. By May 15, he had an AK-47 and was on his way. The 24-year-old stone-factory worker was killed the next day.

Stories like his are taboo in Russia, where the wrenching grief of many families is buried beneath the triumphant bombast of state media. The war is portrayed as an existential struggle for survival, against “Nazis” as well as NATO, and a virtual news blackout about the bloody toll underscores Kremlin anxiety about the durability of its manufactured support.

Yet some stories seep out. Vladimir Krot was a 59-year-old Soviet-trained pilot, a retired Afghan war veteran, who begged to serve in Ukraine. He kept asking despite repeated rejections and, in June, as casualties mounted, he finally was told “yes.” Krot died just days later, when his SU-25 jet went down during a training flight in southern Russia. He left behind a wife and 8-year-old daughter.

The number of war dead is a state secret. It is a crime to question the invasion or criticize the military. Independent journalists who speak to bereaved relatives or cover funerals have been arrested and told that showing such “tears and suffering” is bad for public morale. Authorities have ordered some online memorial pages to be shut down.

The Kremlin’s priority has been to prevent angry voices of mourning families and antiwar activists from coming together and gaining traction. Information about war dead could deter Russia’s increasingly urgent recruitment effort, scraping up prisoners with military experience and offering highly paid contracts for deployments.

Internal security agents visited Dmitry Shkrebet this summer after he accused Russian authorities of lying about how many sailors died when the Black Sea flagship Moskva was sunk by Ukrainian missiles on April 13. His son Yegor, one of the conscripts onboard, was listed as “missing.” The agents accused Shkrebet of making bomb threats and confiscated his laptop, as he detailed on VKontakte, Russia’s version of Facebook. On Tuesday, 111 days after Yegor’s death, the military finally gave his father a death certificate.

“It will never be easier,” Shkrebits wrote in a post. “There will never be true joy. We will never be the same again. We have become different, we have become more unhappy, but also stronger, tougher. We no longer fear even those who should be feared.”

But independent analyst Bobo Lo of the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, believes the Kremlin has largely contained the risk of unrest over the high casualty count. Because most people are so cautious about airing dissent, gauging the real level of support for the war is difficult. Pollster VCIOM, which is close to government authorities, reported in June that 72 percent of Russians back the fighting.

Politically, Russian President Vladimir Putin “has been able to defend this,” said Lo, a former deputy head of mission at the Australian Embassy in Moscow. “Partly through controlling the information narrative, but also because this is now seen as a war against the West.”

With many families afraid to speak out and no credible casualty count, independent media and rights groups keep their own tallies. Their numbers, based only on confirmed open-source death reports, are modest.

The independent Russian outlet Mediazona and BBC News Russian counted 5,185 war dead as of July 29, with the greatest losses in remote and impoverished areas such as the southern region of Dagestan and the Siberian region of Buryatia. The wealthy cities Moscow and St. Petersburg were barely touched, the two outlets concluded. Moscow, with 12.5 million residents, lost just 11 servicemen, and St. Petersburg, 35.

By contrast, the CIA and British intelligence agency MI6 estimate that at least 15,000 Russians have been killed since their country’s invasion of Ukraine in late February, losses equal to the decade-long Soviet war in Afghanistan. And that was “probably a conservative estimate,” MI6 chief Richard Moore told the Aspen Security Forum last month.

Chubarin’s death was an ominous reflection of the Russian military’s desperation. A former conscript from the Karelia region, he signed a three-month contract and was too excited to ask how much he would be paid. His mother, Nina Chubarina, thinks he wanted to prove himself as a man. She wonders if he was trying to win back his ex-wife.

“He knew it was dangerous,” she said in a recent interview. He left on May 11, sending cheerful messages and videos after he arrived in Belgorod in southern Russia. He got little training in his four days there, then made a rushed call home. He had been issued a machine gun and was headed to the war.

“That was it. That was the last time we spoke,” she said. The military told her he was found dead near Mariupol on May 16. “He was a very brave guy, was not afraid of anything. He was so cheerful and open and so kind.”

Chubarina, a dairy farmworker, does not question the war. She just rereads a poem her son sent her while a conscript in 2017, about growing up and leaving her behind: “Forgive me for all the pain that has fallen on your weary shoulders. Please accept my soldier’s bow. It is from the bottom of my heart.”

Sergei Dustin of Baltiysk refuses to be quiet. His daughter, Alexandra, married a marine named Maksim and became a widow at 19. He vented his rage on Facebook, saying Russians needed to ask why their sons were dying.

He described the war as a “massacre started by crazy old men who think they are great geopoliticians and super strategists, incapable, in fact, of anything but destruction, threats against the world, puffing out their cheeks and endless lies.”

Some responses called him a traitor. His son-in-law had left in the winter for “training exercises” and ended up in Ukraine. An old friend from Ukraine was fighting on the other side. Dustin hoped neither would die.

He refused to hear any details about how the young man died, and his daughter shut herself inside her grief. “It’s very hard for her to understand and acknowledge that her husband was taking part in an operation that, to put it mildly, was far from nice,” he said. “This whole story just brings sorrow and tragedy for everyone.”

Not many grieving families publicly question the war effort. The silence serves to minimize public understanding of its impact on the home front. In the eastern Siberia city of Ulan-Ude, a recent survey by the independent news site Lyudi Baikala found that few residents knew that more than 250 people from the region had been killed, a count the site calculated using open sources.

Still, cracks have appeared. In Buryatia, a group of wives of Russian soldiers made a video in June to demand that the military bring their men home. Hundreds of soldiers from the region contacted an activist group there for information on how to break their contracts, according to Alexandra Garmazhapova, founder of the Free Buryatia Foundation. Casualties on a local memorial page on VKontakte rise daily.

On Monday, the deaths of local basketball players Dmitry Lagunov and Nikolay Bagrov were confirmed. A woman named Raisa Dugarova responded on the page. “Why does Buryatia have to bury its sons every day?” she asked. “Why are we doing this?”

The following day there was another entry, about the death of Zolto Chimitov, a corporal in his early 30s who had been born in the rural village of Tsakir. He became a boxing champion, later training to be a forester. He had three children.

“Oh god, please stop this war. How many of our guys can die?” a woman named Yevgenia Yakovleva wrote. “My soul is torn from pain. I don’t know how to accept this, survive and live with it.”