

With Russia Controlling Crimea, Ukrainian Army Allegiances Waver

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SEVASTOPOL, Crimea — Ukrainian serviceman Ivan Marchenko's wife is filing for divorce over his decision to follow orders to withdraw from Russian-controlled Crimea. He is not alone.

Two of the servicemen sharing his berth on a train bound for Ukraine's heartland have also split with their wives who wanted them to stay in their hometown of Sevastopol, now firmly in the grip of Russia's Black Sea Fleet after Moscow annexed the Crimean peninsula following a referendum last month.

Ukrainian military personnel face a stark choice: go back to the mainland or leave the service and try to make a new life in Russian uniform or as a civilian in Russian-controlled Crimea. Marchenko had a clear recollection of his conversation with his wife, whose name he did not want to give.

"She told me: 'Go surrender. They [the Russians] pay more'," said the 27-year-old from Lugansk who served for 10 years at a Ukrainian missile base near Sevastopol and is

leaving his two-year-old son behind.

"Suddenly I am an occupier. This is her city. She was born here. I mean I was born in Russia, in Magadan, but I grew up here and I am Ukrainian ... You only swear an oath once."

But the overwhelming majority of some 18,800 service personnel who the Ukrainian Defense Ministry says stuck out the month-long siege of their bases in Crimea are now ignoring orders — unswayed by purse-strapped Kiev's lackluster offer to uproot their families and move them to the mainland.

Only about 4,300 will continue their service, Ukrainian Defense Ministry officials said.

Demoralized by Russia's swift takeover of their bases in reaction to the overthrow of Ukraine's pro-Moscow president after months of protests in Kiev, many more are instead trusting in President Vladimir Putin's pledge that they will be rewarded for swapping sides to join a Russian military newly revitalized by a sweeping modernization.

Winning over their allegiance is a Russian propaganda coup but also a sign of the parlous state of Ukraine's Army.

Its 180,000-strong military is no match for a Russian force that the government in Kiev and its Western supporters fear Putin could order into mainly Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine.

In moves Kiev described as part of a Russian-orchestrated plan to justify an invasion, pro-Moscow activists in eastern Ukraine have seized weapons in one city and declared a separatist republic in another.

Among the Ukrainian rank and file in Crimea, the split between those choosing to remain in the Army and those choosing to leave the ranks is along geographical lines — highlighting the country's often muddled sense of national identity since independence in 1991.

In Crimea, under Russian rule for centuries and gifted to Ukraine by Kremlin leader Khrushchev in 1954 when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, ties with Russia have remained strong. Many people have relatives in Russia.

Out of a 308-strong battalion under his command in Kerch, Major Oleksy Nikiforov said only 59 were leaving Crimea with him. About 20 want to quit.

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