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Silent Deaths: The Price of a Russian Soldier's Life

By Anna Pivovarchuk

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On Oct. 17, following a search at the offices of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers in the southern Russian city of Budyonnovsk, Lyudmila Bogatenkova, the head of the branch, was arrested and charged with fraud. The 73-year-old, who is disabled and suffers from diabetes, spent two nights at a detention center and had to be taken to the local hospital following her release on Oct. 20. She has released a statement declaring her innocence.

The case is unprecedented, and not only on legal grounds. Under Russian law, it is unusual to detain those charged with economic crimes, as well as pensioners or invalids, unless they represent a risk to society. Given Bogatenkova's age, health and charges, the incident demonstrates the depravity that enters the justice system when politics are involved.

The revelations made by the
Committee of Soldiers'
Mothers about the number

of Russian soldiers dying in Ukraine are just another example of the Kremlin's complete lack of regard for the lives of those serving in the Russian army, writes columnist Anna Pivovarchuk.

In late August, Bogatenkova was one of the first to announce that the 11 Russian soldiers declared dead earlier that month were killed in Ukraine. According to official statements, they were either killed during an exercise in the Rostov region on the border with eastern Ukraine or were discharged from the Russian armed forces and entered Ukraine as volunteers.

The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers stated that all were contract soldiers who were part of the 18th Brigade, stationed in Chechnya. The Defense Ministry refused to comment, citing that it had no information about the death of its soldiers on Ukrainian territory.

"Russia is not conducting a military operation in Ukraine" has been the official mantra propagated by the Kremlin since the annexation of Crimea, when "little green men" — unmarked Russian special forces — participated in the takeover of the peninsula. State media mentioned a Russian casualty in Ukraine in early September, claiming that the paratrooper killed in the Donbass region in eastern Ukraine was officially "on vacation" at the time of death.

In the meantime, widespread evidence of Russia's covert involvement in the conflict has surfaced with persistent regularity. There was the case of the 10 paratroopers who got "lost" in Ukraine during a routine border patrol, the scattered Russian tanks and military rations, and the hushed transport of dead soldiers who were killed during the battle for the Donetsk airport in May.

This secrecy is a well-rehearsed policy. During the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, planes carrying bodies of soldiers landed at night, in an attempt to cover up the escalating casualties of the conflict. Similar attempts to play down increasing casualties incurred by the Russian army were made during the first Chechen war from 1994 to 1996.

Current attempts to cover up the presence of what Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu amusingly termed "polite people" in Ukraine is politically expedient and fits the pattern of the Russian government's continued disregard for the lives of its soldiers, but it becomes nearly impossible to conceal in the age of the Internet and smartphones.

The Kavkazsky Uzel website reported that families of the killed soldiers have been forced to sign non-disclosure agreements about the conditions of the soldiers' deaths. Ukrainian bloggers published photographs of documents and weapons belonging to Russian soldiers who were killed in the Donbass, while the Gruz200 website continues to run photos and names of those killed, captured or missing, as does Russia's Dozhd TV.

Gazeta.ru cites a surreal case of a paratrooper from Pskov, whose funeral was announced by his wife on the social-networking site VKontakte, only to be replaced by a message stating

he was alive and well. When a journalist tried to call, a man claiming to be the deceased soldier picked up the phone, yet the funeral went ahead as planned.

War is chaotic, and there is bound to be misinformation, mistakes and false accusations. Yet when the Russian government insists that these are "volunteers" fighting an ideological war in their own free time, it reveals the lack of responsibility of the Kremlin for the lives of those it has commissioned to fight for it. And this is where the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers becomes an irreplaceable buffer against lies, indifference and sometimes plain criminality.

The NGO was formed in 1989 to provide legal aid to Russia's vast army of conscripts and their parents, numbering about 4 million. Every year, the Moscow office receives more than 7,000 complaints, 60 percent of which are against violations of human rights to life and human dignity. According to a U.S. State Department human rights report, in 2010, Russia's Defense Ministry confirmed 14 deaths from hazing, while the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers put that number at 2,000.

Veronika Marchenko, head of the Mother's Right NGO, estimates that about 2,000 to 2,500 soldiers die each year, with the official figure as low as 471 for the year 2010. In many cases, families struggle to find out about the real causes of death — forced to accept the often mutilated, tortured bodies of their sons with no official explanations. Without organizations such as the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, they would have no one to turn to.

The committee came to prominence during the first Chechen war, when the Russian government often refused to negotiate the release of captured soldiers, abandoned them behind enemy lines or left them for dead, including from friendly fire. Images of women who traveled to war-torn Chechnya to negotiate the release of their sons with Chechen militias will linger in the memory of anyone capable of basic empathy.

What Bogatenkova's disclosures reveal is not only an effort to cover up Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian civil war, but an attempt to shirk all responsibility for those dying in it. Needless to say, there will be no compensations paid out to the families, no legal recourse to justice or even knowing the circumstances of death. Little, yet a last comfort for the bereaved relatives.

A few days after the statement by the committee was made public in August, the Justice Ministry listed the St. Petersburg branch as a foreign agent — a designation it denies. A deputy from Pskov, Lev Schlossberg, whose newspaper first published photographs of the killed paratroopers from the region, was assaulted shortly after he called for a public disclosure of casualties in Ukraine. Numerous news outlets began to recall Bogatenkova's previous allegations of fraud, which were all dismissed.

In an earlier interview with Dozhd TV, Bogatenkova was unafraid: "With all this dirt being splashed over me on the Internet, I always said: You can come and pour sh-- over me, head to toe. But when I see a mother and son smile, and when they thank me, crying, that is my biggest reward."

In today's Russia, with its newly found devotion to the Orthodox Church and its moral code, the price placed on human life and dignity still remains conspicuously unholy.

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