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More Than a Decade After Military Reform, Hazing Still Plagues the Russian Army

By Alexey Zhabin

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Hazing has been part of life for conscripts in the Russian army since the end of the 17th century. **Kirill Kukhmar / TASS**

Having the Russian word for "cock" carved on his forehead with a razor blade as punishment for smoking an illicit cigarette in his barracks toilet was the last straw for Private Artyom Pakhotin.

Two weeks later, on April 19, 2018, he shot himself dead with an AK-74 during his platoon's drill training session in the Urals region of Sverdlovsk.

"Mom, don't believe what anyone tells you. They're bullying me here, exhausting me psychologically and extorting money ... I don't see how I can go on. I'm already very tired. I'm sorry it all turned out like this," said his last text message to his mother, shown on the local

TVK television channel.

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Pakhotin's case isn't unique. *Dedovshchina*, Russian for hazing, has been part of life for conscripts in the Russian army since the end of the 17th century, when Russian Emperor Peter the Great first introduced compulsory military service.

In 2008, the authorities introduced reforms that included cutting compulsory service from two years to one and changing the military's management structure and education system. Extreme hazing persisted until 2012, when the effects of the reforms became evident. But today, conscripts nearing the end of their year-long stint still bully new arrivals through rape, beatings and humiliation, sometimes with tragic consequences.

In November 2019, a 20-year-old conscript gunned down eight of his fellow soldiers in the town of Gorny in the country's Far East, saying he had acted in retaliation to bullying and a rape threat.

"I regret I couldn't restrain myself and that I resorted to this extreme step, but I had no other way out. I couldn't take any more mistreatment," Shamsutdinov wrote in an open letter circulated by his lawyer on social media.

There are no official statistics on the number of hazing cases in the army, but a report from the RBC news website said that in 2018 more than 1,100 military personnel were convicted on charges of abuse of power, and 372 for violence.

Lawyer and ex-soldier Alexander Latynin, a supervisory board member of the Union of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia NGO, estimated that the reported number of convictions is just the tip of the iceberg.

"We receive about 300 phone calls a day — 10% of them reporting hazing incidents — along with 20 emails a day, one or two of which will be about hazing," Latynin told The Moscow Times, adding that the other complaints are about verbal abuse from officers, inadequate medical treatment and failure of the authorities to issue uniforms.

All able-bodied Russian men are obliged to complete a year of compulsory military service before they turn 27, although thousands manage to avoid it by bribing recruiting officials and doctors. According to official statistics there are 1.9 million Russian army personnel, about 80% of whom are conscripts.

Another military NGO — Mother's Right — estimates based on the requests for help it has received that only 4% of military conscript deaths happen in the line of duty, while 44% are suicides.

"Conscripts face extortion, beatings, bullying, inducement to suicide and other crimes," said spokeswoman Anna Kashirtseva.

RBC estimated that convictions for abuse of power in the Russian army have halved in the past 10 years, while the number of convictions for violence has fallen fivefold since 2008.

The Defense Ministry didn't respond to requests for comment on the scale of hazing in the military.

Arseny Levinson, a lawyer with the Citizen and Army human rights group, said the level of hazing has fallen since the 2008 reforms.

"The scales of violence based on the informal hierarchy, which was based on period of service, decreased as the term of service was reduced," said Levinson.

He added that technology has also helped, as smartphones and the internet make it more difficult to cover up hazing.

However, last year a law forbidding the usage of phones and any devices with access to the internet for serving military came into force.

Timur Ilyasov, a conscript who served in northwestern Russia from 2018-2019, said that anyone's experience with hazing and bullying depends on their personal traits, and that he believes some level of friction is normal in a military team.

"If you allow yourself to be bullied, they will bully you and make you do what they want ... It's just a male environment, the interaction of 100 men in an enclosed space."

He said there were frequent clashes in his platoon, although superior officers monitored proceedings closely.

"Every evening they examine your body and, if you have bruises, both you and your supervisors will be penalized," he said, adding that this has made bullies adept at administering beatings with the palms of their hands, so as not to leave marks.

Extortion of money

Commentators said that the nature of *dedovshchina* is also changing, with the extortion of money playing a more central role nowadays.

Latynin said that hazing represents a crisis in Russian society, and pointed out that educated and well-disciplined soldiers never haze others.

The closed nature of the army system, absence of normal leisure time for conscripts and poor officer training also contribute to creating the conditions for hazing, Levinson said.

"Soldiers have almost no leave, they are trapped and isolated from relatives and public control," he said.

Latynin believes that up to 30% of conscripts are unfit for military service and estimated that it takes them anywhere from six months to a year to adapt to army life.

Kashirtseva believes that *dedovshchina* still exists because, in most cases, nobody is held responsible for it because of the country's lack of a legal culture.

“Russians think that beatings, bullying and extortion in the army are a school of life for conscripts, which every boy has to graduate from if he wants to become a real man,” she said.

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