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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

At a Young Russian Soldier's Funeral, Denunciations of 'Ukrainian Nazis,' Soviet Dissolution

The Moscow Times attended the funeral of one of the hundreds of servicemen believed to have died in Russia's "special military operation."

By Felix Light

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Kirill Ulyashev's coffin was laid beneath a Russian flag and a paratrooper standard. **MT**

VORONEZH — On a cold March morning in a southern Russian suburb, several dozen people gathered at a church to say goodbye to one of their own.

Inside a coffin wrapped in the Russian flag and the paratroopers' standard lay 21-year-old Kirill Ulyashev — one of the many Russian servicemen believed to have died in Moscow's nearly month-long "special military operation" in Ukraine.

“Kirill is here as a warrior of Christ,” the priest began. “He fought against evil, Satanic spirits: Ukrainian Nazis, created by American multinational corporations.”

The priest — Father Gennady Zaridze, a short, plump, bespectacled man with a long beard streaked with grey — is something of a local celebrity in Voronezh.

At Sunday services, Maybachs and Rolls Royces belonging to the loyal elite line up outside his church on the edges of town.

According to local journalists, on Christmas Day 2015, the priest was granted a personal meeting with President Vladimir Putin, who was visiting town.

“The destruction of the U.S.S.R. was a great deceit visited upon the Russians,” the priest continued. “There was no law by which the republics were dissolved. Everything that was built after 1990 is a lie. All this will soon come to light, and you will know it.”

Most of those inside the church were Ulyashev's classmates, young people no older than 22 years old, as well as relatives, and soldiers.

After the 20-minute speech, Zaridze let those present kiss the cross, and asked for pallbearers.

To Kirill’s parents, clinging to the zinc coffin’s lid, he said: “Please don’t. There’s nothing left to hold onto.”

‘We were told to just accept it’

Four days before the funeral, on March 12, a military commandant had arrived at the Ulyashev family's home to report that their son had died in Ukraine.

According to the paperwork, sapper Kirill Ulyashev had died two weeks earlier, on Feb. 27 — the third day of Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine — from wounds inflicted by a mine. He had received shrapnel wounds to his abdomen, arms and legs.

The young man’s remains were brought home to Voronezh in a zinc coffin on March 15, his body so badly damaged that even his parents were forbidden to open the coffin.

"How can you be sure it's him? We were told to just accept that he is no more,” said Kirill’s friend, 20-year-old Ira Fedorova.

Like many young Russian men, Kirill had joined the army as a conscript. After two months of military service he signed on as a professional soldier, joining the elite 76th Guards Airborne Assault Division, widely known as the Pskov Paratroopers.

In mid-February, Kirill and his comrades were sent for military exercises on the border with Ukraine. There, the men’s phones were taken away, allowing them to call their relatives only occasionally.

On Feb. 26, Kirill wrote to his family from the forests north of Kyiv, telling them that everything was alright. The next day he was dead, killed on the approaches to the Ukrainian

capital.

‘Good against evil’

A long column with a hearse, a military truck and few locals’ cars drove along the village’s pot-holed main street to the local House of Culture, where the village head, 66-year-old Anatoly Kokin, and the district head, 42-year-old former FSB officer Dmitry Maslov, delivered eulogies over the coffin.

In the House of Culture, a Soviet-era venue that once held dances and concerts, the coffin lay in a spacious hall.

Local officials made their speeches and expressed condolences to Kirill’s family, his grandmother, mother, father and sister, all sitting near the coffin. The dead soldier’s grandmother howled plaintively.

“Dear relatives, and loved ones, we all bring condolences to our hero, our Kirill, and we understand that no words can console the grief that we are experiencing. Today, thousands of our fellow countrymen mourn with us. He remained faithful to his military duty to the end and died heroically not at war with Ukraine, not at war with the Ukrainian army, but in a battle of good against evil. He did everything to ensure that goodness won in this world. Bow low to his eternal memory; rest in peace, brother,” said Maslov, head of the Novousmansky district.

“We are seeing off a wonderful young man who died in a war that is being fought to defend our country from the evil that our grandfathers did not finish during the Great Patriotic War,” said the district military commissar.

“He was a patriot, he chose the path of a defender of the fatherland, his memory will always be in our hearts.”

Blue beret

About 50 people laid red carnations atop the coffin. After that, the body was again loaded into the hearse and taken to a rag-tag cemetery just across from a small supermarket.

A burial plot had been prepared for Kirill on the very edge of the graveyard. People crowded onto a small patch of land, a military band at the ready.

An officer in his 30s from Ulyshev's airborne brigade showed up and re-told the circumstances of the young man's death to the gathered mourners.

“Kirill died in the village of Bucha near Kyiv. Their group carried out a combat mission and encountered the Nazis. The soldiers completed their task in full. Unfortunately, in this battle we lost our paratrooper brother, our comrade. His name will be immortalized. By presidential decree, for courage and bravery shown in battle, Kirill Alexandrovich has been awarded the Order of Courage, posthumously,” the officer said.

Kirill’s relatives gathered around his coffin. His grandmother was still weeping, wrapping her hands around the zinc box. The family began to pull her away.

As the band struck up the Russian national anthem, the coffin was slowly lowered into the ground.

A row of cadets fired a salute from their Kalashnikovs. Burly men dumped earth into the newly dug pit, piled dozens of wreaths onto the grave and erected a wooden cross bearing a portrait of a thin young man in a paratrooper's beret.

Kirill’s blue parade beret was given to his mother. It was the only thing left to her from her son after his departure to exercises in February.

The village head announced that everyone could go to a cafe for a memorial dinner, paid for by the local administration.

The roadside cafe was a small, red-brick building at the entrance to the village. Bearing the name “Prestige,” its interior was decked out in cheap, faux-luxury decor.

Long tables in the hall were filled with snacks: chicken, fruit, wine, vodka and kutya — grain porridge with raisins — a dish traditionally served at Russian funerals.

Elderly men in their 50s and 60s chatted about events in Ukraine. For some, it was a reminder of their own youth, when the coffins of local boys killed in Afghanistan began to arrive back in the village.

Men sat down at the table. Someone silently poured vodka. There were paratroopers from Kirill's brigade, his relatives, and young people. The latter sit silently, looking at each other.

“It’s a very strange feeling,” says 21-year-old Lada.

“I have never been at a wake surrounded by all my friends before.”

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