

Born Under Putin, Dead Under Putin: Russia's Teenage Soldiers Dying in Ukraine

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Igor Ivkin, 19, was killed in heavy fighting outside Kharkiv. **Family archive**

Yulia Ivkina would have preferred her husband to become a carpenter, not a soldier.

But as the coronavirus pandemic dented the Russian labor market and the newlyweds from the western city of Pskov tried for a baby, 18-year-old Igor Ivkin reasoned a short-term contract in the army was the best option to safeguard his family's future.

Igor enlisted in February 2021, shortly before Yulia realized she was pregnant. A little over a year later, he was killed in heavy fighting outside Kharkiv amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He was seven months short of his 20th birthday.

"People from the draft board told me about his death, they came to me with a death notice on March 25. He was buried on March 30 in the village of Vorontsovo where he was born," Ivkina,

24, told The Moscow Times.

Igor Ivkin is one of at least 25 teenage Russian soldiers to have died fighting in Ukraine, according to a review of official statements and social media posts by The Moscow Times.

Russia admits to losing 1,351 military personnel since the start of the invasion, but independent evidence suggests the real figure — as well as the number of teenagers to have been killed — is far higher.

The Russian teenagers killed in Ukraine belong to the so-called “Putin generation” of those who were born under President Vladimir Putin’s 22-year rule.

Many of these young contract soldiers lack military expertise and are more vulnerable on the frontlines, according to Russian military expert Pavel Luzhin.

“When you are 18 or 19 years old you don’t have as much fear of death as you do when you’re 25, and with a lot of testosterone in your blood, you do stupid things,” said Luzhin.

The exact numbers of teenagers in the Russian army is classified, but there are likely to be thousands currently fighting in Ukraine.

“Kids! We’re kids. They took us at 18 years old!” one group of furious soldiers apparently serving in the Russian army in an attack on the Ukrainian town of Sumy shouted into a video camera last month. “The Russian Defense Ministry has no idea about us, or what we’re doing here, they’re throwing us directly into this s***.”

Many of these recruits first found their way into the army through the military draft, which requires all men between the ages of 18 and 27 to serve a year in the armed forces.

More often than not, those from big cities or more middle-class backgrounds are able to avoid the draft by enrolling at universities, exploiting loopholes or paying bribes. This means most of the younger recruits are young men from small towns and villages all over Russia.

“He would say that... avoiding the army was not an option,” Ivkina said of her husband.

The youngest Russian soldiers to have died in Ukraine were 18 years old. They include Ilya Kubik, who perished several weeks shy of his 19th birthday over 3,000 miles from his Siberian hometown of Bratsk; and David Arutunyan, also 18, from the Russian republic of Buryatia bordering Mongolia, who was killed by Ukrainian artillery fire.

The motivations of these young men vary from economic necessity to patriotism.

Ivkina said her husband was compelled by a sense of duty.

Some teenagers have even been awarded medals. Eighteen-year-old Arutyunyan received a posthumous Order of Courage for reportedly pulling a fellow soldier to safety moments before he was killed.

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But the details of a soldier's death are very [hard to verify](#).

"Russia's war dead will always be framed as tragic but heroic. Many people do not like to feel their child died in vain," said Allyson Edwards, a British academic who specializes in Russian militarism and patriotic education.

And there is also evidence that conscripts are pressured into signing contracts, which make it easier for military authorities to deploy them to a war zone.

"If you are a conscripted soldier in the armed forces, you serve three months, and the officers come to you and propose you sign a contract. If you say no, they come again after six [months], after nine [months], and several days before your demobilization," said Luzhin.

"They will try to brainwash you that... the armed forces need you. What will you do in your village? What will you do in your life? They will say. And people sign the contract."

Many parents of soldiers claim that — prior to Russia's attack on Ukraine — some young recruits were coerced into signing contracts.

"Parents were told that their sons were simply taken away by military officers, their documents stamped and that's it — they are now contracted soldiers," Olga Larkina, director of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, [told](#) the independent Meduza news website in February.

Conscripts have been repeatedly deployed abroad in Russia's recent history, according to Luzhin, including in Chechnya in the 1990s and in Georgia in 2008.

Russian officials admitted last month that some conscripts were present in Ukraine following the invasion, but said this was a mistake — and that those responsible would be punished.

In some cases, conscripts may have been flung into combat as a result of changing battle plans following intense Ukrainian resistance, which scuttled Russia's plans for a lightning operation. There have been reports of poor morale and unwillingness to fight among Russian troops in addition to severe logistical difficulties.

Yulia Ivkina said her husband did not have enough food and witnessed military incompetence before he died.

"He grew frustrated by the chaos in the army, the total lack of discipline, the fact that they were screwing around all the time," she said.

A few weeks before the start of the invasion in late February, Ivkin was able to return home from where he was stationed in Kursk, near the Ukrainian border, to see his newborn daughter.

But four days into what was supposed to be a 10-day stint of leave, he received a call from his commanding officer who told him to return to his unit immediately.

“Our baby girl was only two weeks old,” Yulia Ivkina said of her husband’s final visit. “He had time to see her, to hold her in his arms. I am very happy he did.”

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