The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Officials Rush to Buy Empty Grave Plots — Investigation

June 06, 2022



The graves of Russian soldiers killed during Russia's military operation in Ukraine at a cemetery in Volzhsky, outside Volgograd, Russia. **AP / TASS**

Regional officials across Russia are rushing to buy fresh graves plots at an "abnormal" rate, investigative news outlet Mozhem Obyasnit reported Monday.

The number of burials purchased by local governments far outstrips figures from previous years, according to public procurement records.

The sudden shift in policy could be linked to unreported deaths among the Russian military fighting in Ukraine, Mozhem Obyasnit wrote on Telegram. Russian authorities usually only purchase graves for those who have died without relatives, or for people from vulnerable groups whose families cannot pay for their funerals.

Officials in Russia's Far Eastern region of Khabarovsk have asked contractors to prepare some 700 burial sites, compared to a similar order of just 120 graves five years earlier.

Authorities in Siberia's Krasnoyarsk region ordered 100 plots to be dug by the end of the year, while dozens more were ordered by the Urals' city of Kopeysk and the northwestern republic of Karelia.

The discovery comes days after Ukraine and Russia exchanged the bodies of hundreds of deceased servicemen for the first time since the conflict began on Feb. 24.

The Russian government announced in March that 1,351 soldiers had been killed in the invasion of Ukraine, but has not released any official figures since.

Open-source data collected by independent Russian media meanwhile has verified the deaths of more than 3,000 Russian soldiers as of late May.

Some of Russia's most impoverished regions, including the Republics of Buryatia, Dagestan and Chechnya, reported the highest number of casualties, with deaths in excess of 100 soldiers.

Other estimates on Russia's death toll range from 15,000 by the British Defense Ministry, to more than 30,000 casualties reported by Ukrainian officials.

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