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‘We Cannot Win’: Russia’s Military Veterans Opposing The Ukraine War

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A Russian sapper in the occupied city of Mariupol. **Nikolai Trishin / TASS**

After retiring from the Russian Air Force at the rank of lieutenant-colonel, Vitaly Votanovsky got involved in political activism in the southern Russian city of Krasnodar.

Now, he is a vociferous opponent of the invasion of Ukraine and has been repeatedly detained for photographing the graves of dead soldiers.

“Putin destroyed the country’s military mobilization resources with his own hands and now this idiot has gotten himself into the war with the entire world,” Votanovsky told The Moscow Times.

“He created circumstances in which we cannot win.”

One of a handful of military veterans who have been publicly critical of Russia’s attack on Ukraine and the Kremlin’s mobilizing of military reserves, Votanovsky and others like him

have been targeted by wartime censorship laws and on the receiving end of anger from former comrades.

“We [veterans] all talk and discuss what is going on,” said Nikolai Prokudin, a 61-year-old veteran of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan who opposes the war in Ukraine.

“There are people with views identical to mine, others are less radical... But most people are fooled by the propaganda,” he told The Moscow Times.

Prokudin co-authored a petition last year against an “escalation of the war” in Ukraine with fellow veteran Sergei Gulyaev, who served as a Soviet intelligence officer in Afghanistan.

While the petition was later unsigned by many veterans who were initially supportive, Gulyaev has not removed his name.

“I don’t know if I will be mobilized,” he told The Moscow Times. “But I definitely won’t go to fight against Ukraine. Better to be jailed.”

One reason why Gulyaev feels so strongly about the Ukraine war is because a Soviet soldier from Ukraine saved his life in Afghanistan. That man’s son, a soldier in the Ukrainian army, was killed in 2014 in a battle with Russia-backed separatists.

“A soldier who got me out of a very serious situation on a road in Afghanistan. His son died while defending Donetsk airport... His only son,” Gulyaev told The Moscow Times.

Gulyaev learned of the tragedy during a 2016 reunion of Afghan war veterans, which was held in Belarus.

“You could feel the chill and it was clear there was a lot of resentment toward what Russia has done with Crimea and Donbas... I realized that we are sitting together but my country killed his son,” he said.

Several veterans have been fined for speaking out under wartime censorship laws passed in March that were widely seen as part of the Kremlin’s efforts to silence critics of the invasion.

A court in Russia’s northern Vologda region in May convicted 64-year-old retired Captain Nikolai Smyshlyaev of “discrediting the Russian army” by posting anti-war pictures on VKontakte social media platform.

Smyshlyaev was subsequently ordered to pay a 30,000 ruble ($496) fine.

And retired officer Andrei Prikazchikov was charged in June with a similar offense by a court in the central Russian city of Orenburg.

Former Air Force officer Votanovsky has been detained multiple times since the invasion.

Most recently, he was stopped by police earlier this month while filming new military graves in the southern Russian town of Tikhoretsk.

“My experience in opposition politics tells me everything in our country rests on lies,” he said.

Former members of the military interviewed by The Moscow Times cited different reasons for opposing the war: while some call it an "unjust" attack on a smaller neighbor, others were concerned it would cause untold pain for Russia.

"I saw all those ruined houses in Grozny," said Igor Knyazkov, a veteran of Russia's war in Chechnya and ex-policeman who was convicted of "discrediting" the Armed Forces in June for replacing his profile picture on social network VKontakte with a photo reading "no war."

"Taking into consideration what is happening in Ukraine right now and how they are trying to take over territories... using our, the Russian people's, money... [it's clear that] we will be paying for their mad ideas," Knyazkov said.

All the ex-servicemen agreed that endemic corruption and the incompetence of senior commanders meant success on the battlefield in Ukraine was unlikely.

"Neither Putin nor [Defense Minister Sergei] Shoigu served a single day in the army, so they have only a feeble idea about the state and capabilities of our armed forces and of the armed forces of Ukraine," said Gulyaev.

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Votanovsky said military reforms under former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov "practically destroyed" the Russian army, but that the true first step to "ruining" Russia's military might was reductions to the length of compulsory military service in 2007.

"Modern warfare is, first of all, the warfare of technology, knowledge and skill. It's not possible to teach a conscript any high-tech skills in a year," said Votanovsky.

For Gulyaev, his opposition to the invasion of Ukraine resulted in his loss of the chairmanship of an Afghan veterans' organization in his hometown St. Petersburg.

Half of the members opposed his re-election because of his anti-war views.

"I told them: 'Guys, I won't go with him [Putin] into battle. He is not leading our troops astride a white stallion but sitting in a bunker in the Kremlin or in a palace in Gelendzhik with his yachts and his whores," he said.

Fellow Afghanistan veteran Prokudin also believes that opposing "criminal" orders does not violate the military code of honor.

"They [Ukrainians] are my friends and comrades, so I am deeply outraged by what is happening," Prokudin said.

"I would, of course, defend our country from Ukrainians, from Belarusians, from Turkmens, from Kazakhs," he added. "But only when we are attacked."

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