

'I Don't Owe Russia Anything': The Young Russian Conscripts Captured by Ukraine

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Russian prisoners of war at a Ukrainian facility at an undisclosed location in the Sumy region. **Genya Savilov / AFP**

SUMY REGION, Ukraine — In a 20-square-meter room in an undisclosed prison in northeastern Ukraine, eight young Russian conscripts sit on their beds, staring at their feet.

Just weeks ago, they had been serving their mandatory year of military service in Russia's Kursk region, which borders Ukraine.

When Kyiv launched its cross-border incursion on Aug. 6, hundreds of these conscripts, outgunned and undermanned, quickly surrendered and were taken across the border as prisoners of war.

They are now internationally regarded as prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention. They are guaranteed respectful treatment, sustenance and humane conditions.

The Moscow Times was authorized by the Ukrainian Defense Ministry to speak alone with the conscripts and observe their conditions. Their names have been withheld to protect their identities.

“We feel good here,” said one conscript, aged 21, who had been stationed in Kursk for only two months before the incursion. “We heard [from our officers] that they torture, torture, torture. But in reality, it turned out to be different.”

Along with other members of the press, The Moscow Times’ reporter met with the prison warden before being escorted into the Russian prisoners’ living quarters.

Each prisoner who spoke to The Moscow Times gave their explicit permission to be interviewed and was allowed to speak freely, with prison guards waiting outside the room. There was no evidence that they were compelled to provide pre-prepared answers.

“The conditions [here] are good,” the 21-year-old conscript explained. “They feed us three times a day. We have a place to sleep. We have a toothbrush. We can brush our teeth. We have a bathroom. We have a kitchen. We have everything we need for our lives. For hygiene.”

Each prison cell has a television, running water and bunk beds and appeared to be kept clean. Some living quarters are bigger than others. Prison staff maintained a friendly and respectful demeanor. Many of the prisoners already knew each other from their time together in Kursk.

The conscripts expressed little loyalty to the Russian state. Many noted that they were unprepared — and frightened — when ordered to defend Kursk.

Another conscript, a 22-year-old from St. Petersburg, explained that he and his unit had almost nothing to defend themselves.

“[I had a] Kalashnikov machine gun. Just a machine gun. Two machine guns for our platoon. Two RPGs. Seven to eight rounds on them. That’s it. And grenades,” he said.

The conscript described how his platoon was completely overwhelmed as it was sent into combat with little preparation.

“When we were attacked, we fought for a very long time,” he said. “We were shot at from somewhere for about 2-3 hours. And we retreated to one of the positions. For some reason, the Ukrainians didn’t look for our positions. And we managed to survive there from night to morning. ... Nine people most likely surrendered as soon as the fighting started. And we stayed with the commander to accept the fight. Because we had to.

“And at that moment, when there was no one left, there was no chance. I didn't even shoot a single bullet when the shootout started. They started to go around from above, from below, from the rear. I understood it was over. The Ukrainians were coming. My friend came up to me. I already had a grenade in my hand. He said it was time. So we said goodbye to one another, pulled the pins, and threw our grenades at our feet.”

The young conscript was severely wounded in his legs by his own grenade. He receives medical care at the prison, where his wounds are cleaned and he is given medication.

“In general, it’s fine,” he said of his condition. “When I arrived, I couldn't even walk. Now I can at least learn to walk again. That is, slowly, slowly. But, unfortunately, the problem here is that my wounds have not yet healed. When I stand on my feet, I have a lot of pressure on my legs. Unfortunately, the bones have not yet fully recovered.”

In addition to their lack of combat experience and training, Russian conscripts, unlike the contract soldiers who volunteer to fight in Ukraine, are young men with little interest in the war. Under Russian law, they must serve in the military for one year and may be sent to the battlefield after four months.

The 22-year-old conscript from St. Petersburg said he did not support the war.

“I feel sorry for everyone. Children, old people. Because the old people still remember what was there in the past. I don't understand what that was like. And the young people, you just look at them and realize that they just want to live. And, alas, because of all this, [because of] us, [the Ukrainians] can't do it. And you understand that in the end, the guys in the Kremlin will still sit down with serious faces and say, we have achieved peace ... Go to hell, guys.”

Related article: [Russia’s Use of Inexperienced Conscripts for Kursk Defense Raises Questions](#)

Another Russian conscript from the Voronezh region said that he was “neutral” toward the war.

“I have no anger or hatred toward this state [Ukraine],” he said, adding that he now understands that he and many others like him were influenced to hate Ukrainians by Russian propaganda.

Speaking in private with the guards out of hearing range, the common sentiment among the conscripts was a feeling of betrayal by their own government, which threw them into a war that they did not support or believe in, with little chance of survival.

A 20-year-old conscript from Bryansk said that although his platoon was given the order to fight to the last man, the entire platoon surrendered, with 11 young men being taken prisoner “without any problems.”

Early in the invasion of Ukraine, reports surfaced of conscripts being killed or sent to the front lines despite President Vladimir Putin’s promises that they would not be deployed to combat zones — sparking backlash from military mothers and wives.

Authorities transferred these conscripts to Russia’s border regions in response, hoping to avoid further backlash.

That strategy has apparently backfired, with families’ anger flaring as news spreads of their loved ones being captured and taken to Ukrainian prisons.

In the two weeks since Ukraine’s incursion, Kyiv claims to have taken over 2,000 prisoners of war, allowing it to [“replenish its exchange fund”](#) for potential swaps with the thousands of Ukrainian servicemen held in Russian prisons and POW camps.

On Saturday, Russia and Ukraine [swapped](#) 115 prisoners of war each, some of whom were Russian conscripts captured during the Kursk offensive.

All of the prisoners interviewed by The Moscow Times expressed a desire to return home, to be with their families and to never return to war again.

“I would like to say that I'm very glad that we were able to get through the war alive ... and I will try to make sure that a war like this never happens again,” a conscript from Moscow said when asked how he will feel when he returns home.

Should the war continue, he said: “It's without me, guys. I have my family, I have my life, my future. I'm not going to die for these bastards. I don't owe Russia anything.”

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