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‘Extermination of Entire Nations’: Scientist Maria Vyushkova Counts Russia’s Indigenous War Dead

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Maria Vyushkova. **Courtesy photo**

On her YouTube channel, Maria Vyushkova describes herself as “a scientist by profession, Buryat by ethnicity” and “anti-war and decolonial activist by the sphere of social engagement.”

In the three years since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Vyushkova, who holds a Ph.D. in chemistry, has emerged as the lead expert on the involvement of Russia’s Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in the war.

While Indigenous activists long sounded the alarm about the disproportionate mobilization of minorities for the war, Vyushkova was the first to back these claims up with hard data and shed light on the true scale of ethnic disparities in the confirmed Russian-side casualties.

The Moscow Times spoke with Vyushkova about using scientific knowledge in activism, the myth of "Buryats in Bucha" and the seemingly impossible task of counting Indigenous casualties.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

MT: When did you first apply your scientific knowledge to activist work?

MV: Way before the invasion of Ukraine.

When [Russian President Vladimir] Putin ordered to install cameras at polling stations in 2012, [pro-democracy] activists decided to take advantage of it. They downloaded the videos to count how many people *actually* voted in the election and check for possible irregularities in the vote-counting process. I was one of the volunteers doing this...and saw a lot of terrible things happen on those recordings.

MT: You joined the Free Buryatia Foundation with the start of the full-scale invasion...

Yes, I was one of its co-founders.

MT: ...and there your ability to merge science with activism flourished.

It turned out that no one else in the foundation had any experience working with data...So I was reviewing obituaries [of soldiers], keeping the count of the deceased, trying to understand why so many of them were from Buryatia, and so on.

Rumors that it was the Buryats who had killed civilians in the Ukrainian town of Bucha during its occupation by Russia played an important role in shaping my work.

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I was educated at a highly respected scientific school and taught that a true scientist must question everything. So I started investigating these rumors because nobody else questioned them and I wanted to understand what was behind them, how it all actually happened.

I looked at the lists of the deceased soldiers compiled by Mediazona volunteers to see which ones died in the town of Bucha in March 2022. It turned out that it was mostly paratroopers from Pskov [a Russian region neighboring Estonia, Latvia and Belarus] who had been dying there throughout the entire month, which didn't quite align with the picture presented by the media. So I thought: 'Okay, something doesn't add up here.'

As I continued gathering evidence, comparing sources and cross-referencing prisoner testimonies, I realized that these were, indeed, the paratroopers of the 76th Pskov Airborne Division — a conclusion also reached by the Conflict Intelligence Team and supported by the surveillance footage and other materials published by Ukraine.

MT: But the myth about 'Buryats in Bucha' lives on, doesn't it?

Yes, it spread widely and became very popular — not just in Russia, but also in Ukraine and

the West. Do you remember the Pope's controversial statement?

Whenever media outlets mention Russian war crimes, there is an excessive focus on representatives of Asian ethnic groups. No one wants to deal with this uncomfortable topic — people are afraid that accusing Ukrainians [of racism] might be perceived as morally inappropriate. But this issue needs to be addressed.

Some evidence from prisoners signals that ethnic Buryat POWs in Ukraine are treated worse than Russian ones. This is a troubling trend. It means we can no longer encourage Buryat soldiers to surrender because no one knows what could happen to them.

I'm also afraid that Russian propaganda could abuse this trend to encourage people in Buryatia — and other Asian republics — to join the war to seek revenge for their relatives.

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MT: Could you describe the process of gathering information on the ethnic composition of casualties on the Russian side in the war in Ukraine?

In the Free Buryatia Foundation, we focused on three geographical areas where Buryats live: the republic of Buryatia, the Irkutsk region and the Aginsky district of the Zabaykalsky region.

We collected obituaries from social media, posts made by relatives, information sent to us in private messages and reports on local television.

MT: Many Indigenous people adopted Russian first and last names as a result of Moscow's forced russification and Christianization policies over the centuries. So how exactly do you decipher someone's ethnicity?

I and my fellow volunteers don't just look at the name and the photo. We examine what is written in the obituary, where the person was from, what language the comments are in, whether those comments are from relatives, and so on.

Ethnicity is a very complex matter and deciphering it is not simple. It is impossible to automate that process.

In a study published in the Journal of Computational Social Science, Alexey Bessudnov from the University of Exeter used AI to search for 'ethnic' names in the lists compiled by Mediazona. But frankly, I disagree with his conclusions.

MT: You have recently switched your focus on counting losses among the small-numbered Indigenous communities of Siberia and the North. What prompted you to do that?

No one talks about them, but when you rank ethnic groups by the number of deaths per capita, Chukchis, Udeges, Eskimos and Nenets are far ahead of both the Buryats and Tyvans, for example. Small-numbered Indigenous communities are overrepresented in all lists, including those of soldiers recruited from prisons — most likely, excessive incarceration among these peoples also plays a role.

For instance, for the Nenets [whose total population in Russia is around 50,000] per capita losses are roughly the same as those of the Tyvans [who number at 295,000].

Another example: the village of Elabuga in the Khabarovsk region. Eighty Indigenous families are living there and 15 men from those families were mobilized, while another 10 supposedly signed contracts as 'volunteers.' These are horrifying numbers.

These communities need men to sustain their traditional way of life, which means they may lose their cultural identity altogether as a result of this war. This is essentially the extermination of entire nations — it's terrifying.

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MT: You also monitor general trends in Russia's war losses; could you tell us what the latest figures reveal about the situation on the front line?

I won't be the first to say this, but 2024 was the bloodiest year of this war. The rate at which deaths are increasing has grown dramatically.

The second notable trend is the shift in losses toward the west [of Russia]. That is, Buryatia is no longer among the leading regions by casualty numbers. Instead, the top are...Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, as well as the Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk regions.

The situation with Bashkortostan and Tatarstan is catastrophic. The number of casualties from there continues to rise with no end in sight. The two republics are large regions population-wise — especially compared to Buryatia — but they still rank around 20th in deaths per capita out of 83 regions plus several occupied territories. This means their per-capita losses are already significantly above the national average. They have even surpassed the republics of Sakha (Yakutia) and Kalmykia.

This surge in losses began after mobilization... When the assault on Avdiivka started in October 2023, I noticed a sharp increase in casualties from Bashkortostan. At the time, I predicted that Bashkortostan would take the lead in losses — and that prediction came true.

Moscow region is also now in fourth place by losses — something we haven't seen before. Although there are many military units in the region, they haven't been heavily involved in active combat until a certain point in the war. It seems [the authorities] deliberately tried to avoid losses [among soldiers] from Moscow and regions around it, but now they are also being sent to the grinder.

MT: What do you feel when processing all these lists and statistical data?

It's really hard to look at all of this. I feel like I got to know at least 500 dead men in person while manually processing all the information.

It's terrifying.

Especially when it comes to small-numbered Indigenous communities who are 100% victims of this situation because they are heavily dependent on the government and often have no

access to qualified legal assistance.

None of them have ever tried to challenge [the receipt of military] mobilization [summons] in court — even though there are grounds for it — simply because they can't get access to a competent lawyer who is also brave enough to take on such a case. That's the first issue.

The second issue is their catastrophic dependence on the state because their traditional way of life has essentially been criminalized. Russian environmental protection laws not only fail to protect nature but they are also shaped to turn these people into criminals.

It's terrifying to witness the death of men from these communities because you realize that in one or two generations, entire cultures could easily disappear — and no one knows or cares about that.

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