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'We Have Our Own Gestapo': A Russian Military Deserter Recalls His Time Inside a Secret Jail for Defectors

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Mikhail Tereshchenko / TASS

In October 2022, Georgy, a 44-year-old father of three from the Moscow suburb of Lyubertsy, was mobilized and sent to fight in Ukraine despite severe health issues and his staunch opposition to war and violence.

After two failed escape attempts and suffering two heart attacks, he finally managed to desert in May 2024. Now in Europe with his family, Georgy is seeking political asylum.

One chapter of his ordeal stands out as particularly harrowing: his time in secret detention facilities where defectors were held in brutal conditions.

President Vladimir Putin has denied the existence of special detention camps for military deserters.

Nearly 16,000 soldiers have been charged with criminal refusal to serve since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, according to independent media.

Georgy's story was verified by the Farewell to Arms group and the InTransit crisis group. His last name has been withheld for safety reasons.

'You came here to die'

Georgy, a civil engineer by training, never imagined he would be drafted. Diagnosed years earlier with high blood pressure and a heart condition, he had been deemed only "partially fit" for military service. Since then, his nearsightedness had worsened and he had broken one of his feet.

When he was summoned to the military office in September 2022 to "clarify his records," he believed it was just a routine update.

"I left early that morning thinking I'd show my passport and military ID, confirm some details and head to work," he recalled. "But when I arrived, I saw two lines: one for people like me and another for volunteers. Oddly enough, most of the volunteers were turned away, while people like me — they needed us."

Within minutes, Georgy was handed a mobilization order. No medical exam was conducted. When he protested, officials told him the health screening would happen later at his assigned unit. It never did.

Even his employer — a major construction contractor for the Moscow city government — was unable to help. Despite initial promises to secure him a non-combat role, he was categorized as a rifleman and sent to a training camp.

"The training was a joke," Georgy said. "We fired a few shots from rusted rifles, then spent the rest of the time wandering around. Nobody taught us anything."

In November 2022, he was assigned to the 1855th Battalion and sent to Ukraine. Officers reassured the troops that they were part of an "elite Moscow unit" and would not be sent into direct combat.

"They told us, 'Moscow will protect you.' It was all lies," Georgy said.

His first impressions of Ukraine were grim.

"It was complete chaos — like we'd been thrown back in time to the German army marching on Moscow in 1941, just with different uniforms. Late fall, rain, mud instead of roads, destroyed villages... a land ravaged by war," he recalled.

He is still haunted by a speech given to his unit by the regiment commander, Alexander Zavadsky.

"You came here to die," Georgy quoted Zavadsky as saying. "Want to go home? Then leave in a body bag."

Not long after, Zavadsky was awarded the "Hero of Russia" medal by Putin.

After weeks of sleeping in the forest without shelter or supplies, Georgy knew he had to escape. Taking advantage of the chaos at the front, he hitched a ride on a military truck to the town of Troitske.

"When they asked me for a password at checkpoints, I'd just shrug and they'd wave me through. Most of the guards were recently mobilized too. They didn't know what they were doing," he said.

'We have our own Gestapo here'

When he tried to cross back into Russia, Georgy and a group of fellow deserters were ambushed. A patrol helicopter opened fire, killing two of the men. The survivors were captured and handed over to the military police, who warned them to forget what they'd witnessed.

"I thought they were taking me to Zaitsevo, which had become infamous for holding defectors. But instead, we ended up in a basement in Rozsypne," Georgy recalled.

Rozsypne — a repurposed Ukrainian border post — was an unofficial prison used to detain Russian soldiers attempting to flee.

"It was shocking," he said. "The floor was sandy, the walls were bloodstained and we slept on wooden cots. There were two sections: one for 're-education' — that's where I was — and another for the 'undesirables.' We had to clean up the blood in that section. It was everywhere, even on the ceiling."

Prisoners were fed twice a day — barely enough to survive — and taken to the toilet only twice daily. Those who refused to return to the front were beaten and tortured.

"They used electric shocks, punched us in the gut — just enough to hurt but leave no bruises. The 'undesirables' were killed outright. We could hear their screams through the walls," Georgy said.

The stress and abuse took a toll. Georgy suffered a heart attack but survived thanks to a sympathetic local doctor, himself an ex-defector, who prescribed bed rest and medication.

"Again, it was like a time machine. People were abused, beaten, tortured there. It was shocking to see this kind of thing in the 21st century," he said. "I am from an older generation. We were raised on the idea that during World War II, we were resisting evil fascists. It turns out we have this evil, too, and it's in the system. The people who tortured us were given an order and taught to perform it. While propaganda claims that there are fascists in Ukraine, we have our own version of the German Gestapo here."

Eventually, after he agreed to his superiors' demands to "repent" for deserting, he was sent to fight near the Russian-occupied city of Svatove as part of the infamous Storm Z squad.

A nearby explosion injured him again — breaking his leg, giving him a concussion and triggering another heart attack.

He was temporarily sent home to recover. But knowing that going to a military hospital would mean being sent back to the front, Georgy disappeared, hiding out for nearly a year in a near-abandoned village in the Tula region.

But in December 2024, when he made a rare trip to visit his family in Moscow, he was ambushed by three plainclothes officers. Within hours, he was on a military transport to Russia's Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad.

Inside Kaliningrad's secret prison

In Kaliningrad, he was held in a military detention facility that was said to have been a German SS barracks during World War II.

This facility was more organized than the makeshift detention centers Georgy had previously encountered. Prisoners were confined to barracks under strict surveillance and escorted to meals.

"The only difference was we were on the second floor and got three meals a day instead of two," he said. "And now the torture was psychological, not physical."

Prisoners were given a grim choice: jail or return to war. Many of those who chose prison, thinking it would guarantee their safety, ended up redeployed anyway. When Georgy was told that he was set to be flown back to the front line, he was saved by a bureaucratic mishap — a prosecutor failed to complete his paperwork on time.

His long-requested medical evaluation was finally approved, but only after he agreed to vote for Putin in the March 2024 presidential election and submit a photo of his ballot.

But the prosecutor's assistant asked doctors to declare Georgy fit for service anyway. The only one who refused was a cardiologist, who sent him to a hospital. But even that did not help.

"In the hospital, they magically upgraded me from 'partially fit' to 'fit with minor restrictions.' ... Apparently, the German walls have healing powers," Georgy joked.

Despite the prison-like conditions, inmates could still get their hands on alcohol and drugs by paying bribes. Because Georgy did not partake, he was labeled "well-behaved" and rewarded with "fresh air": being ordered to help construct a villa for the regimental commander without pay.

"There was no guard escort, just a major watching us. Some ex-convicts among the inmates taught me escape tricks and gave me civilian clothes. After a week, I climbed the fence, called a cab to the airport and flew to St. Petersburg."

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At the consultation of Idite Lesom ("Get Lost"), a group helping Russian military deserters, Georgy flew to Uzbekistan via Belarus. After an unsuccessful attempt to request asylum in Spain, he made his way to Georgia.

When the authorities realized he had fled, they turned their attention to his wife, Oksana, who remained in Lyubertsy with their children.

“The investigators started calling at the end of June,” Oksana said. “They told me his health didn’t matter, that he was done, and the only way out was to surrender. I said, ‘Your message is noted’.”

Law enforcement contacted their eldest daughter, who had just turned 18, and threatened to visit their younger children’s school. In September, they raided their home with a search warrant.

“They took all our devices,” Oksana said. “When they raided my elderly parents’ home too, I broke down. … When they came with a warrant again on Orthodox Christmas Eve, we made the decision to leave.”

Oksana left Russia in January and reunited with her husband in Europe, where he went after Georgia’s controversial November 2024 election raised fears of persecution. They are now awaiting a decision on their asylum application.

For the first time in over two years, Georgy said his family finally feels safe despite the uncertainty that lies ahead.

“The bureaucracy is tough, but the people here are calm, welcoming and empathetic. Leaving was hard, but now our focus is on raising our children to be Europeans,” he said.

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