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‘No One Will Bring My Husband Back’: Russian Military Widows Process Their Loss Through Social Media

By Angelina Trefilova

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A widow holds her husband's hat and portrait in her hands. **Alexander Polegenko / TASS**

“The special military operation will end. The presidents will reach an agreement. But... no one will bring back my husband,” Russian military widows from different regions write on Instagram.

Their videos are often accompanied by footage of their dead husbands and a track by the singer Machete: “I'm crying, your mascara runs.”

Among those sharing such videos is Natalia from western Russia’s Belgorod region bordering Ukraine. Her husband, Andrei Knyazev, signed a 13-year contract with the Defense Ministry in 2017.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Natalia launched a series on her Instagram titled

“Letter to My Husband” in which she addressed Andrei while he was away on the front lines.

“I know this will all be over soon, and you’ll come home. I’m waiting,” she wrote.

On Oct. 13, 2022, Natalia learned that Andrei had been killed in combat.

“I remember that day down to the minute,” she wrote on Instagram, which is banned in Russia.

Natalia now has 7,000 followers on Instagram and describes herself as “a widow learning to live again.” In her most popular video, which has nearly 1 million views, she shares glimpses of her grief and how she copes with loss through scenes in a church, her home and a swimming pool.

“I’ve spent two and a half years wishing this was just a terrible dream, that my beloved husband would smile at me and our children, not from a photo on a gravestone,” says Natalia in a post to women considering getting married to a Russian soldier.

In the comments under her posts, some viewers call Natalia the wife of a hero. Others ask why her husband went to war against Ukraine.

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As social media has become more ubiquitous, people have increasingly used it as a space to process their grief, psychologist Galina Petrakova told The Moscow Times.

“Social media, as a relatively new part of our lives, is also becoming a part of the mourning process,” she said. “It offers the psyche an additional way to reflect and cope with loss, as well as a channel for receiving support, especially from others who have gone through similar experiences.”

According to Petrakova, the psychological impact of social media on grief remains complex and difficult to measure.

Still, “posting offers widows a way to express their pain and to feel that both they and their loss are being witnessed,” she said.

“Maybe this topic [my husband’s funeral] doesn’t belong on Instagram,” wrote Maria in a recent story. “But I’m trying to find ways to survive in this world, and maybe this helps.”

Maria buried her husband this past March. She found out about his death on the day of their son’s fourth birthday and later recorded a reel reflecting on that moment. Now 28, she is raising two sons alone, the younger of whom is less than 1 year old.

Before her husband’s death, Maria would blog about motherhood, cosmetics and handmade toys. Today, in her videos, she addresses her infant son: “This child will never know what a father’s love and care feel like. It’s not fair!”

Former wives of mobilized soldiers are also sharing stories of their husbands’ deaths on their

blogs.

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Bronislava from the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk became a widow at 29.

“On October 8, my husband left after receiving his draft notice. I didn’t want him to go — there were tears and fights — but there was no choice,” she wrote on social media.

In the comments, one follower answers: “I’m sorry for your loss. It’s hard to go through something like this. But what hurts even more is that, in truth, they weren’t sent to defend the homeland, but to attack their neighbors.”

Nearly a year after burying her husband, Bronislava threw her wedding ring into the sea, hoping to break the “bond that once was.”

“At each stage of grief, people search for ways to process the overwhelming emotional experience they’re going through,” psychologist Petrakova said. “The ability to share that experience with others is a key part of coping with loss, reflected in the many rituals that different cultures offer those who have lost a loved one.”

Like other war widows, Bronislava posts reels set to the theme song of “Landyshi,” a Russian TV series that romanticizes military service and the war in Ukraine.

“I miss you, and it feels like forever,” the song’s lyrics say over a montage of photos of her late husband.

“We imagined a different ending for our story. In none of [these endings] am I bringing flowers [to your grave],” writes another widow, Natasha, on Instagram. She buried her husband six months ago.

In the comments, other women share their losses.

“The ‘special military operation’... the mobilization... How many of us are there, mourning the fallen?” one of Natasha’s followers asks rhetorically.

Petrakova says the death of a loved one can sometimes have an impact on military widows’ worldviews and values, but not always.

“At some point, a person learns to exist again in a world without their loved one and begins to explore different ways of engaging with that reality,” she says. “They may start to reinterpret what happened in various contexts and use their experience of loss to support their values through positive actions.”

“In the case of military widows, this can mean a more active civic stance, often visible on social media, shaped by their personal journey of grief and reflection,” Petrakova said.

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