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‘Still Just a Child’: The Russian Teenagers Fighting and Dying in Ukraine

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Conscripts at a military enlistment office in Moscow. **Vasily Kuzmichenok / Moskva News Agency**

“Why?! A young soldier who’d never seen combat … Still just a child,” Svetlana Serezhkina, a resident of the Moscow region, wrote on social media after news emerged of the death of Alisher Svirin, the first publicly identified Russian soldier born in 2008 to be killed in the war in Ukraine.

“It’s such a shame they let him sign a [military] contract,” wrote another commenter, Andrei. Dozens of similar comments written by residents of Svirin’s hometown of Pavlovsky Posad appeared under the same post.

According to his obituary, Svirin had served as a machine gunner in a motorized rifle brigade. He was just 14 when President Vladimir Putin launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

More than 200 Russian soldiers aged 18 have been killed in the war, according to a count by the BBC's Russian service and the exiled news outlet Mediazona.

The real number may be higher, as the tally excludes soldiers listed as missing and fighters from the Russian-backed separatist territories in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Turning 18, then heading to war

The pro-war Orthodox Christian VKontakte group Synodik, which has about 50,000 followers, carries dozens of obituaries for soldiers who were teenagers when the invasion began.

In Orthodox Christianity, a *synodik* is a list of names of the living or the dead who are remembered in prayers and church services. Likewise, Synodik's members pray for Russian soldiers like they would in a real church. The comments, mostly posted by women, are filled with Orthodox prayers, animated images of icons and cross emojis.

One recent post commemorates Kirill Tretyakov, who was born Feb. 7, 2007, near the end of Putin's second presidential term. He had just turned 15 when the full-scale war began.

Tretyakov grew up in Kamensk, a settlement of about 6,300 people roughly 100 kilometers (62 miles) from Ulan-Ude, the capital of Russia's republic of Buryatia. After completing ninth grade at a local school, he enrolled in a vocational college to study construction. He enjoyed kettlebell lifting and football in his free time.

Tretyakov signed a contract with the Defense Ministry six days after his 18th birthday, according to his obituary.

"From an early age, Kirill strove to be a worthy citizen of his country. On Feb. 13, 2025, Kirill made the courageous decision to defend the Fatherland and signed a contract with the Defense Ministry," the group's administrators wrote.

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The Moscow Times found identical obituaries in a VKontakte group about Ulan-Ude and on the website of Buryatia's Kabansky district. Tretyakov served as a combat engineer in an obstacle-laying company of the 656th Separate Guards Engineer-Sapper Battalion. He was killed on Sept. 22 of this year.

"Kirill strove to learn everything a real man should know. He was a brave, determined and fearless warrior who always put the common cause above his own," his obituary reads.

A psychologist in Russia who works with adolescents said that many young people struggle to grasp the reality of going to war.

"The risk of being killed is very high, but young people don't think about that," the psychologist told The Moscow Times, speaking on condition of anonymity for safety reasons.

“When you’re young, you feel like life will last forever, like you’re invincible. Teenagers lack the social circle, the word-of-mouth networks, that could help them think critically about the war.”

That illusion of invulnerability is compounded by a broader devaluation of life in Russia, the psychologist said, referencing television propagandist Vladimir Solovyov’s comment on air that “life is greatly overrated.”

‘They are joining the Lord’s army’

The number of “newly departed warriors,” as the Synodik group calls them, rises almost every day. The group also publishes obituaries for soldiers from Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories.

“Nikolai was a simple guy. He finished school in our village and was open, cheerful and kind,” the head of the Voikovsky rural settlement in annexed Crimea, said of Nikolai Ruzov, 19. Ruzov was six when Russia annexed the peninsula in 2014 and 14 when the full-scale war began.

Like all draft-age men without a deferment, Ruzov completed a year of compulsory military service before signing a contract with the Defense Ministry and going to fight in Ukraine’s Donetsk region. He was killed on Aug. 18, 2026, less than three months after his 19th birthday.

A Crimean news outlet illustrated his obituary with an apparently AI-generated image presented as a portrait of Ruzov that was later reposted by other outlets. The soldier in the image wears a U.S. flag patch on his shoulder. The Moscow Times analyzed the image using Hive’s AI-detection software, which returned a 100% confidence score that it was AI-generated.

Ruzov had been the commander of an assault squad, state media reported.

“Can someone explain how a 19-year-old boy ended up commanding an assault squad?!” one commenter, Maxim Borisov, asked.

Among those offering condolences online were mothers whose own sons had been killed in the war.

“May Nikolai enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and may you find the strength to learn to live with this irreplaceable loss. Our children don’t die … they are joining the Lord’s army. My boy has been there for four years,” Tamara Romanova wrote on the social network Odnoklassniki.

Ruzov was posthumously awarded Russia’s Order of Courage.

Another 19-year-old soldier, David Fedorov, died on Oct. 20 after being sent on an assault mission, according to his mother.

Police stopped Fedorov on the street in Cheboksary, the capital of the Volga republic of Chuvashia, in May and forced him to sign a contract with the Defense Ministry, his mother told the independent news outlet Astra. He was officially assigned to serve as a driver despite having no driver’s license, she added.

The deaths of young soldiers also feature in state efforts to promote the war in schools.

On Sept. 21, materials for "Important Conversations," a series of state-mandated patriotic lessons, highlighted two soldiers killed in the invasion at ages 20 to 25. One was Nurmagomed Gadzhimagomedov, a soldier from Dagestan who died in the first month of the full-scale war.

"When I see examples of heroism like this young man ... I want to say: 'I am a Lak, I am a Dagestani, I am a Chechen, Ingush, Russian, Tatar, Jew, Mordvin, Ossetian'," Putin said after Gadzhimagomedov's death in March 2022.

Footage of Putin's remarks was included in a seven-minute video shown to schoolchildren, while pupils were also offered an interactive lesson about Gadzhimagomedov's life.

Military personnel in their early 20s also visit schools to deliver patriotic lessons. The children's psychologist said in-person meetings with returning soldiers could have an even stronger influence on teenagers.

"Soldiers are surrounded by an aura of heroism," the psychologist said. "The person who comes to speak to you is alive. He fought for three years and came back. Now he's addressing an audience and has a stable position in society."

"Young people have little to lose," the psychologist continued. "They don't yet have families of their own or things they would find painful to give up, so war can seem appealing."

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