

Russian soldiers are also victims of Putin's war

*Several thousand Russian soldiers have reportedly been killed during the war in Ukraine. **Alissa Kole** argues that while the people of Ukraine are rightly the focus of the world's attention, the loss of Russian soldiers should be added to the cost of the conflict.*

*Pravda (Truth) was the major daily newspaper distributed in news kiosks when I was growing up in Odessa in the 1980s. Once Soviet propaganda, it still exists and epitomises Russia's approach to controlled media. The 'truth' that appears on the pages of *Pravda* is the one that still dominates Russian public opinion. Within Russia's borders, there is no news of the war in Ukraine, and Russian state media is forbidden from using the words 'war' or 'invasion' to describe what is taking place.*

In a cyberattack on Russian state-controlled channels, hackers managed for a few minutes to broadcast real images from Kyiv, Kharkiv and other cities, demonstrating that the Russian army is ruthlessly attacking unsuspecting citizens. The damage to the Russian economy that has occurred since the invasion means that some facts are starting to permeate Russian public opinion, whether Putin likes it or not. With those images and realities, a different kind of truth is slowly sinking into the collective conscience of the Russian public, especially for the mothers, wives, and sisters of men sent by Putin to fight this cruel, futile war.

And the truth is, that they are not men – they are mostly boys, as the images that have emerged from Ukraine show. Slowly, even in the limited public space that exists for debate in Russia, the plight of these young men is starting to make some – for now small – difference. Russian soldiers captured by the Ukrainian army have been filmed calling home to tell their mothers, sisters, and wives where they are now, and what they have been up to since they left to attend a 'training exercise' in Belarus, where their telephones were confiscated.

A famous Ukrainian journalist, Dmytro Gordon, has been posting dozens of videos of these boys calling home to tell their mothers that they are in Ukraine, only to hear the silence and shock on the other side of the line. They did not know, nor can they imagine, that their sons are now prisoners in Ukraine or worse, scattered dead on its territory. They had not been told their sons would be sent to war, much less to Ukraine, to fight people who look like them, speak like them, and breathe like them.

They did not know, just as my mother did not know, when one day someone knocked on the door of our small apartment in Odessa to take my father to join the Soviet Army. My father, who was completing a doctorate in physics at Odessa State University and had never seen a pistol much less a Kalashnikov, was sent to fight somewhere in Afghanistan. In truth, I do not know where to this day, as he has never spoken about his time there.

In the Soviet Union, there was not much talk of post-traumatic stress disorder, which became an internationally recognised condition after American soldiers started to return from another useless war – this time in Iraq. My grandmother said my father was never the same after his return, and I believe it. She has for years regretted bribing a Soviet army official, resulting in my father still being drafted but a few months later when the Soviet powers decided to invade Afghanistan. I was a newborn when he was sent to fight in that war, and less than one when he returned.

Back then, the Soviets also thought they would have the Afghans on their knees in no time. It would be an understatement to say it did not work out that way. The only thing that my father remarked about the subject of Afghanistan when, on CNN one day, they were discussing American casualties, is that "they will never win that war". And when one looks at photos of Afghan women in elegant suits in the 1960s, and them now, it is impossible to deny how terribly wrong that war has gone for everyone concerned: the Afghans, the Soviets, and the Americans.

There are win-win situations, there are win-lose situations, but there are also lose-lose ones. That war was the latter. And it is beside the point now to argue whether it was the Americans or the Soviets, during that long Cold War, who did more damage. What is important to remember however, is that that war also started with the Soviet powers drafting boys to fight, without any thought of the human cost, including for their own army. And today, as then, the Russian Army has already reportedly lost thousands of lives. The real numbers are unknown.

However, as the Russians are the perpetrators of aggression, the world is not preoccupied with them. And, on some level, watching my friends flee Kyiv and my family hide from aerial bomb alerts in their apartment in Odessa, I also feel little sympathy for them. But in the end, I tell myself, they are just like my father, sent – most without any knowledge of what awaits them – to fight a losing war. “Love is a losing game”, in the words of Amy Winehouse. So is war. And the losers of this game are the Ukrainian people, taken hostage by one of the world’s most powerful armies with nuclear capabilities.

Yet, Russian soldiers’ lives should be added to the expensive bill of this war. In Russian, there is a word for it – *Мясорубка* (meat grinder). That is the end towards which Putin has sent his boys to fight. And looking at the footage from the conflict, I have felt a growing pity for them, too, those boys who did not ask for this war, who were not told they would be sent to Ukraine, and who are dying like flies as a result of Putin’s senseless war.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [kremlin.ru](https://www.kremlin.ru)
