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Putin's Russia

Anna Politkovskaya

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About the Book

Former KGB spy Vladimir Putin, named Prime Minister of Russia in 1999 and, one year later, President, successfully marketed himself as an enlightened leader with both feet planted firmly on the Eastern borders of Europe. Indeed he became, for a period, something of a media darling in the West. Anti-establishment journalist and human-rights activist Anna Politkovskaya disagreed strenuously with this point of view. In *Putin's Russia*, she trains her steely gaze on Putin 'without the rapture'.

From her privileged vantage-point at the heart of Russian current affairs, Politkovskaya reports from behind the scenes, dismantling both Putin the man and Putin the brand name, arguing that he is a power-hungry product of his own history in the security forces and so unable to prevent himself from stifling dissent and other civil liberties at every turn. After centuries of living under tyrants, Politkovskaya argues, this is not what contemporary Russians want.

The book is, however, not simply a biography or an analysis of Putin's presidency. Politkovskaya's writing is known for its humanity and its passion, and her focus is on individual human beings and their stories. 'My book is jottings made on the margins of life in Russia. For the time being, I cannot analyse that existence. I'm just living and noting what I see.' So her readers are treated to an exposé of mafia dealings and scandals in the provinces, of corruption in the military and the judiciary, of the decline of the dissident intelligentsia and concomitant rise of street traders, and of the truth behind the Moscow theatre siege. Other shocking stories fill out an intimate portrait of nascent civil institutions being subverted under the unquestioning eyes of the West.

About the Author

Known to many as 'Russia's lost moral conscience', Anna Politkovskaya was a special correspondent for the Russian newspaper *Novaya gazeta* and the recipient of many honours for her writing. She is the author of *A Dirty War*, *Putin's Russia* and *A Russian Diary*, to be published in April 2007. Anna Politkovskaya was murdered in Moscow in October 2006.

Putin's Russia

Anna Politkovskaya

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about Vladimir Putin but not as he is normally viewed in the West. Not through rose-tinted spectacles.

Why is it difficult to sustain the rosy point of view when you are faced with reality in Russia? Because Putin, a product of the country's murkiest intelligence service, has failed to transcend his origins and stop behaving like a lieutenant-colonel in the Soviet KGB. He is still busy sorting out his freedom-loving fellow countrymen; he persists in crushing liberty just as he did earlier in his career.

This book is also about the fact that not everyone in Russia is prepared to put up with Putin's behaviour. We no longer want to be slaves, even if that is what best suits the West. We demand our right to be free.

This book is not an analysis of Putin's politics. I am not a political analyst. I am just one human being among many, a face in the crowd in Moscow, Chechnya, St Petersburg and elsewhere. These are my emotional reactions, jotted down in the margins of life as it is lived in Russia today. It is too soon to stand back, as you must if you want to analyse anything dispassionately. I live in the present, noting down what I see.

MY COUNTRY'S ARMY, AND ITS MOTHERS

THE ARMY IN Russia is a closed system no different from a prison. Nobody gets into the Army or into prison unless the authorities want them there. Once you are in, you live the life of a slave.

Armies everywhere try to keep what they do quiet, and perhaps this is why we talk about generals as if they were members of an international tribe whose personality profile is the same all over the planet, irrespective of which particular President or state they are serving.

There are, however, some peculiarities specific to the Army in Russia, or rather to relations between the Army and the civilian population. The civilian authorities have no control over what the Army gets up to. A private belongs to the lowest caste in the hierarchy. He is nobody. He is nothing. Behind the concrete walls of military barracks, an officer can do anything he wants to a soldier. Similarly, a senior officer can do anything he fancies to a junior colleague.

You are probably thinking that things surely cannot be that bad.

Well, they aren't always. Sometimes they are better, but only because a particular humane individual has called his subordinates to order. That is the only time there is a ray of hope.

"But what about the country's leaders?" you may wonder. "The President is the Army's ex-officio Commander-in-Chief and hence personally responsible for what goes on, isn't he?"

Unfortunately, when they make it to the Kremlin, our leaders make no attempt to rein in the Army's lawlessness but are more likely to give senior officers ever greater power. Depending on whether or not a leader indulges the Army, it either supports him or undermines him. The only attempts to humanise the Army were made under Yeltsin as part of a programme of promoting democratic freedoms. They didn't last long. In Russia, holding on to power is more important than saving soldiers' lives, and under a barrage of indignation from General Headquarters Yeltsin ran up the white flag and surrendered to the generals.

Putin hasn't even made any attempts. He is an officer himself. End of story. When he first appeared on Russia's political radar screen as a possible head of state rather than as an unpopular Director of the universally detested Federal Security Bureau (FSB), he began making pronouncements to the effect that the Army, which had been diminished under Yeltsin, was henceforth to be reborn, and that all it lacked for its renaissance was a second Chechen war. Everything that has happened in the northern Caucasus since then can be traced back to this premise. When the Second Chechen War began, the Army was given free rein, and in the presidential elections of 2000 it voted as one for Putin. The Army has found the present war highly profitable, a source of accelerated promotion, more and more medals, and the rapid forging of careers. Generals on active service lay the foundation for careers in politics and are catapulted straight into the political élite. For Putin rebirth of the Army is a done deed after its humiliations under Yeltsin and defeat in the First Chechen War.

How exactly Putin has helped the Army we shall see in the stories that follow. You can decide for yourself whether you would like to live in a country where your taxes sustain such an institution. How you would feel when your sons turned 18 and were conscripted as "human resources". How satisfied you would be with an Army from which soldiers deserted in

droves every week, sometimes whole squads or entire companies at a time. What would you think of an Army in which, in a single year, 2002, a battalion, more than 500 men, had been killed not fighting a war but from beatings? In which the officers stole everything from the 10-rouble notes sent to privates by their parents to entire tank columns? Where officers are united in hatred of soldiers' parents because every so often, when the circumstances are just too disgraceful, outraged mothers protest at the murder of their sons and demand retribution.

No. U-729343. Forgotten on the Battlefield

It is November 18, 2002. Nina Levurda, retired after 25 years as a schoolteacher, is a heavy, slow-moving woman, old and tired and with a string of serious ailments. She has been waiting for hours, as she has many times over the past year, in the unwelcoming waiting room of the Krasnaya Presnya Intermunicipal Court in Moscow.

Nina has nowhere else to turn. She is a mother without a son: even worse, without the truth about her son. Lieutenant Pavel Levurda was born in 1975. To the Army he is No. U-729343. He was killed in Chechnya at the start of the Second Chechen War, the war that, according to Putin, saw the Army reborn. How it was reborn we shall see from the tale of the last months of No. U-729343. It is not the fact that he was killed but the circumstances of his death and the events that followed it which have compelled Nina to do the rounds of legal institutions for the past eleven months. She has had just one aim: to get a precise legal answer from the State as to why her son was left behind on the battlefield. And, coincidentally, to ask why, since his death, she has been treated so abominably by the Ministry of Defence.

As a child, Pavel Levurda dreamed of a career in the Army. Not a common state of affairs nowadays. Boys from poor

families do apply for places at the military academies, but their aim is to get degrees and then get discharged. The endless self-congratulatory reports from the President's office about increasing competition for admission to military institutes are entirely true. But this has less to do with any increase in the Army's prestige than with the abject poverty of those seeking an education. The same situation explains the catastrophic shortage of junior officers in military units. When junior officers graduate from military college, they simply fail to appear at the garrisons to which they have been posted. They suddenly become "seriously ill" and send in certificates testifying to all manner of unexpected disabilities. This is not difficult to arrange in a country as corrupt as Russia.

Pavel was different. He really wanted to be an officer. His parents tried to talk him out of it because they knew what a hard life it was. Petr Levurda, his father, was himself an officer, and the family had spent their lives being shifted around remote garrisons.

Quite apart from that, in the early 1990s everything was falling apart in the wake of the Soviet Empire. A school-leaver would have had to have been mad, everyone agreed, to choose to go to a military academy that couldn't even feed its students.

Pavel insisted on his dream career and went away to study at the Far East College for Officers of the Armed Forces. In 1996 he was commissioned as an officer and sent to serve near St Petersburg. Then, in 1998, he was thrown into the frying pan: 58 Army.

Fifty-eight Army has a bad reputation in Russia. It is synonymous with the degeneration of the armed forces. Of course this began before Putin. He does, however, bear a heavy responsibility, in the first place for the fact that the total anarchy among officers goes unchecked, and in the second for effectively placing officers above the law. To all

intents and purposes, they are not prosecuted no matter what crimes they commit.

Fifty-eighth Army was, in addition, the Army of General Vladimir Shamanov. A Hero of Russia who fought in both Chechen wars, he became notorious for his exceptional brutality towards the civilian population. General Shamanov is retired now. He resigned and became Governor of Ulyanovsk Province, benefiting from his role in the Second Chechen War when he was never off the television screen. Each day he would inform the country that “all Chechens are bandits” who thoroughly deserved to be eliminated. In this he enjoyed Putin’s full support.

The staff headquarters of 58 Army is in Vladikavkaz, the capital of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alaniya which borders Chechnya and Ingushetia. Its troops fought in the First Chechen War and they are still fighting there now. The officers’ corps of 58 Army, following the example of their general, were also renowned for their exceptional brutality towards both the people of Chechnya and their own soldiers and junior officers. Rostov-on-Don is the location of the General Headquarters of the North Caucasus Military District, to which 58 Army is subordinate. The greater part of the archive of the Rostov Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers consists of files relating to desertion by privates as the result of beatings by officers of 58 Army, which is also well known for the blatant theft of supplies from their warehouses and for wholesale treason. They sell weapons stolen from their own stores to field commanders of the Chechen resistance. That is, they aid the enemy.

I personally know many junior officers who have gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid serving in 58 Army. Levurda, however, decided otherwise. He didn’t break ranks, he wrote letters which made heavy reading, he came home on leave, and his parents saw their son becoming more and more morose. No matter how often they urged him to resign, however, he would reply, “What must be done must

be done.” Pavel Levurda clearly was someone the authorities would have been justified in describing as a young Russian with a special sense of duty towards his Motherland and a profound patriotism. In fact, he was hoping for a genuine, rather than a Putinesque, rebirth of the Russian Army.

In 2000, Pavel Levurda had another opportunity to refuse to go to war in the northern Caucasus. Few would have blamed him. Many junior officers found ways to obtain instant exemption. But, as Pavel explained to his parents, he felt he couldn't desert his soldiers.

On January 13, 2000 Pavel went off to war, first reporting to 15 Motorised Infantry Guards Regiment of the 2 (Taman) Guards Division (Army Unit 73881), in Moscow Province. On January 14 Nina heard her son's voice on the telephone for the last time. He had signed a special contract to go to Chechnya, and . . .

It was clear enough what that dreadful “and” portended.

“I cried. I did my best to change his mind,” Nina remembers. “But Pavel said there was no going back. I asked my cousin who lives in Moscow to go straight to the Taman Division, to try to talk him out of it. When she got to the unit she found she had missed him by just a few hours. He had already flown out to Mozdok.” This small town in North Ossetia is on the border with Chechnya. When the war began, it was the main base of the Unified Command of Forces and Troops mobilised for Putin's “anti-terrorist operation”.

And so, on January 18, 2000. No. U-729343 found himself in Chechnya.

“At present I am on the south-western outskirts of Grozny . . .” wrote Pavel in his first and only letter to his parents from the war. It is dated January 24, 2000.

The city is blockaded from all directions, and there is serious fighting going on there. The gunfire does not stop for a minute. The city is

burning, the sky is completely black. Sometimes a mortar shell falls nearby, or a fighter plane launches a missile right by your ear. The artillery never lets up. The losses in the battalion have been appalling. All the officers in my company have been put out of action. The officer who commanded this unit before me was blown up by one of our own booby traps. When I went to see my company commander he carelessly grabbed his rifle, sending a round into the ground a few centimetres away from me. It was sheer luck I wasn't hit. Everyone laughed. They said, "Pasha, there have been five commanding officers of the unit before you, and you almost didn't last five minutes!" The men here are all right but not strong-willed. The officers are on contract, and the soldiers, with a few exceptions, though very young, are holding out. We all sleep together in a tent, on the ground. There is an ocean of lice. We're given shit to eat. No change there. What lies ahead we don't know. Either we'll attack who knows where, or we'll just sit around until we turn into idiots, or they'll pull us out and pack us off back to Moscow. Or God knows what. I am not ill, but I feel so low. That's all for now. Love, kisses. Pasha

This might not seem a good letter for reassuring one's parents. In war you lose the ability to be reassuring and forget what might shock someone far away when you have been shocked a hundred times more yourself.

It later became clear that Pavel's letter really was intended to reassure his parents. When he wrote it, he wasn't in fact lying in a tent wondering what lay ahead. From at least January 21, he was actively involved in the "serious fighting", having first taken command of a mortar unit and, shortly afterwards, of an entire company. The other officers were indeed "out of action" and there was no one else to take command.

Neither was he "on the outskirts" of Grozny.

On February 19, assisting the battalion's intelligence groups to break out of an encirclement and "covering the retreat of his comrades" (according to the citation nominating him for the Order of Valour) from the village of Ushkaloy, Itum-Kalin District, Lieutenant Levurda was severely wounded and died of "massive haemorrhaging following multiple bullet wounds".

So he died in Ushkaloy. In the winter of 2000 the fighting was at its fiercest there - a desperate partisan war in

highland forests, on narrow paths. But where was Pavel's body?

No coffin containing Nina Levurda's son's remains came home to the family to be buried. His remains, she discovered, had been lost by the very State he had tried with such desperate loyalty to serve.

Having taken on the roles of military prosecutor and investigating officer, Nina found out that on February 19, the official date of her son's death, the "comrades" whose retreat he was covering did indeed get away. They simply abandoned Pavel, along with six other soldiers who had saved them, by breaking through the encirclement, at the scene of heavy fighting. Most of those left behind were wounded but still alive. They shouted for help, begged not to be abandoned, as the inhabitants of the remote mountain village later testified. The villagers bandaged some of the wounded themselves, but could do no more. There is no hospital in Ushkaloy, no doctor, not even a nurse.

Pavel Levurda was left behind on the battlefield and then forgotten. It was forgotten that his body was lying there. It was forgotten that he had a family that would be waiting for his return. The survivors simply stopped thinking about those who had died so that they might live.

What happened to Pavel Levurda after his death is typical of our Army. This disgraceful episode encapsulates its thinking. For the Army, a human being is nothing. No-one keeps track of the troops. There is no feeling of responsibility towards the families.

They only remembered about Pavel Levurda on February 24, when, according to information provided by General Headquarters in Chechnya, Ushkaloy was completely cleared of Chechen fighters and "came under the control" of Federal forces. (This explanation was in fact concocted later to prove that "there was no objective possibility" of recovering Pavel's body.)

On February 24, in fact, the Army collected from Ushkaloy the bodies of only six of the seven soldiers who had broken through the encirclement. They couldn't find Pavel Levurda, so they forgot about him again.

Back home, Pavel's mother was hysterical. The only communication she had had was that official letter of February 7. The Ministry of Defence's "hotline" wasn't much help. Talking to the duty officers there was like talking to a computer about the grief that was relentlessly grinding her down. "Lieutenant Pavel Petrovich Levurda is not on the list of those dead or missing." Such was the invariable reply.

Nina listened to the "fully informative" hotline for several months. Unbelievably, even after she had located Pavel's remains by her own efforts, even when she had been officially notified of his death, the commanding officers had not got round to updating the information on their database.

But to return to our story . . . On May 20, three months after the fighting in Ushkaloy, local police discovered "a burial site containing the body of a man showing signs of violent death". However, it was only on July 6, after another one and a half months of Nina's daily telephone calls to the hotline and the local Army commissariat, that the police filled in the relevant form, "Orientation/Task No. 464", in response to a missing-person inquiry.

On July 19 the form finally reached the CID in Bryansk, where Pavel's family were living. Nina, rushing round every conceivable office, had lodged a missing-person inquiry at the police station there. So it was that on August 2, Detective Constable Abramochkin, an ordinary policeman, came round to see Pavel's parents.

The only person at home was another Nina, Pavel's 14-year-old niece. DC Abramochkin asked her some questions about Pavel, discovered what belongings he had had with him, and was greatly surprised to find he was talking to the family of a soldier. Having been assigned this routine investigation, it was DC Abramochkin and not an official

from the Ministry of Defence who informed the mother of a hero that her son had officially been classified as missing without trace, and that from February 20 his entitlement to all forms of provision and allowances had been cancelled. The Itum-Kalin police asked Abramochkin to go round to the parents in Bryansk to find out “the postal address of the permanent deployment of Army Unit 73881 in which Levurda, P. P. had been serving” so they could contact its commanding officer in order to establish the circumstances relating to the death of a person who, from his mother’s description, appeared to resemble one of their officers!

The quote is from the official correspondence. It tells us a lot both about the realities of the Army and about the nature of the war Putin is waging in the Caucasus. In this Army the right hand has no idea what the left hand is doing, so it is easier to post a letter to parents far away than to telephone through to General Headquarters in Hankala (the military base near Grozny).

DC Abramochkin, seeing the state the family was in, strongly advised Nina Levurda to go to Rostov-on-Don as soon as she could. He had heard that the remains of the unknown soldier from Ushkaloy had been taken to the main military mortuary there for identification by Colonel Vladimir Shcherbakov, Director of 124 Military Forensic Medical Laboratory, a man well known and respected in Russia. It should be noted that Shcherbakov does this work not at the behest of commanding officers, generals or General Headquarters, but because his heart tells him it is the right thing to do.

Abramochkin also advised Nina Levurda not to expect too much, because, as we say, “anything can happen in Russia,” where mix-ups involving dead bodies are only too common. The Bryansk Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers was in the meantime helping with the Levurda saga, and it was only through their good offices and the efforts of DC Abramochkin that the élite 15 Guards Regiment and the

even more élite Taman Guards Division finally twigged that the seventh body, left behind by his “comrades”, just might be that of Pavel Levurda.

“We arrived in Rostov on August 20,” Nina tells me. “I went straight to the laboratory. There is no security on the entrance. I walked in and went into the first inspection room I came to. I saw the inspector had a head separated from its body on a stand on his examination table. More precisely, it was a skull. I knew immediately that it was Pavel’s head, even though there were other skulls next to it.”

Is there any way of assessing or compensating the distress caused to this mother?

Of course there isn’t. In any case who can argue against forensic inspectors needing to have skulls on their tables?

And yet . . . What an artless lot we are becoming, thoughtless, crass and, because of it, amoral.

Nina was given sedatives after the encounter with her son’s skull, which she had indeed correctly recognised. At this precise moment a representative of Pavel’s unit came rushing in to see her. DC Abramochkin, having learned the unit’s address from the bereaved parents, had sent a telegram, and the commanding officer had sent a representative to Rostov to take care of the formalities.

The representative showed Nina a notice. She looked at it and fainted. In the notice Guards Lieutenant-Colonel A. Dragunov, acting commanding officer of Army Unit 73881, and Guards Lieutenant-Colonel A. Pochatenko, chief of staff of the same unit, requested that “Citizens Levurda” be informed that “their son, while on a military mission, true to his military oath, manifesting steadfastness and courage, has died in battle”. The unit was trying to cover the tracks of its wretched “forgetfulness”.

When Nina had recovered, she read the notice more carefully. There was no indication of when her son had died.

“Well, what about the date?” Nina asked the representative.

“Just write it in yourself, whatever you like,” he replied.

“What do you mean, write it in?” Nina shouted. “The day Pasha was born is his date of birth. Surely I have a right to know the date of his death!”

The representative shrugged, as if to say, “Don’t ask me,” and handed her a further extract from an order to the operational forces to “remove Lieutenant Levurda from the list of members of the Regiment”. This too bore no date and indicated no reason but did have various stamps and signatures at the bottom. Again, with the artless gaze of a child, the representative asked Nina to fill in the blanks herself and hand it in, when she got home, to the local Army Commissariat so that Pavel could be removed from the register.

Nina said nothing. What is the point of talking to a person who has no heart, no brain and no soul?

“But surely that’s easiest, isn’t it? Rather than me having to go all the way to Bryansk?” the representative continued uncertainly.

Of course it was easier. There is no denying that being artless, being crass, can make life easier. Take our Minister of Defence, Sergey Ivanov, a crony of the President since Putin worked for the FSB in St Petersburg. Every week Ivanov appears on television to deliver the President’s war bulletins. With the inflections of Goebbels on Second World War newsreels, he tell us that nobody will make us “kneel down before terrorists”, that he intends to pursue the war in Chechnya to some supposed “victorious conclusion”. We never hear a word from Minister Ivanov about the fate of the soldiers and officers who enable him and the President not to seem to be kneeling down before terrorists. This political line is wholly neo-Soviet: human beings do not have independent existences, they are cogs in the machine whose function is to implement unquestioningly whatever political escapades those in power dream up. Cogs have no rights. Not even to dignity in death.

It is so much more bother not to be crass. For me that would mean being able to see beyond the “General Line of the Party and Government” to the details of how it is implemented. In the present instance, these details are that, on August 31, 2000, No. U-729343 was finally buried in the city of Ivanovo, to which Pavel’s parents had moved in order to escape the dark associations of Bryansk. The forensic inspectors in Rostov returned Pavel’s head to Nina. Unfortunately, that seemed to be all the remains they had.

Many people in Russia have heard of Nina Levurda because, having committed what remained of her son to the earth, on the ninth day after the funeral she set off to the headquarters of 15 Regiment in Moscow Province. When she started out from Ivanovo, her intention was only to look Pavel’s commanding officers in the eye and to read in them, when confronted by their officer’s mother, at least some remorse for all the things they had “forgotten” to do.

“Of course, I didn’t expect them to apologise,” Nina says, “but I did think I might at least see some sympathy in their faces.”

When she arrived at the Taman Division, however, nobody wanted to see this mother. The commanding officer was simply unavailable. Nina sat for three days waiting to meet him, without food, tea, sleep or anyone paying attention to her. Senior officers scurried to and fro like cockroaches, pretending not to notice she was there. It was then that Nina Levurda vowed to sue the State, to bring an action against the Ministry of Defence and Minister Ivanov for the moral suffering they had caused her. Not in connection with her son’s death: he did after all die in the performance of his duty. But in respect of what happened subsequently. Translated from convoluted legal jargon into plain speech, she wanted to know who was responsible.

What happened next? First, the Order of Valour awarded posthumously to Nina’s son was presented to the family in

the Army Commissariat in Ivanovo. Second, the Army took its revenge. The Ministry of Defence and the Taman Division went on the warpath against this mother who had dared to express her outrage at their behaviour.

This is how they went about it. In just under a year there were eight court hearings, the first on December 26, 2001, the last on November 18, 2002, none of which came to any conclusions whatsoever. The court did not even get round to considering the substance of Nina's writ, because in their impunity the representatives of the Ministry of Defence ignored the hearings completely. And they were right to do so. The case of "Nina Levurda against the State" first came before Judge Tyulenev (Krasnaya Presnya Intermunicipal Court, Moscow). He decided that a mother "has no right to information" about the body of her own son, and the Ministry of Defence was accordingly under no obligation to supply her with such information. Nina went to the Moscow City Court, where, in view of the manifest absurdity of the previous verdict, the case was referred back to the Krasnaya Presnya Court for a new hearing. The State machine's technique against the bereaved mother was a systematic boycott of the court sessions by Minister Ivanov's official representatives and by Land Forces Command, of which the Taman Division and 15 Regiment are part. They simply failed to appear, brazenly and systematically. So Nina Levurda had to keep going back to Moscow from Ivanovo, only to find herself confronted with an empty dock, her journey wasted. A simple woman dependent on her State pension, which aims only to keep you from starving, and with a husband who had taken to the bottle after Pavel's funeral as a way to escape from their suffering.

In the end, Judge Bolonina of the Krasnaya Presnya District Court, to whom the case had been referred from the Moscow City Court, became exasperated. At the fifth hearing missed by the defendants, she fined the Ministry of Defence 8,000 roubles. Paid for by the taxpayer, of course.

It is a pity this fine was not paid by Minister Ivanov to Nina Levurda. There is no provision for anything of that sort. Russian legislation protects the interests not of the weak but of the all-powerful authorities.

On November 18, 2002, after the imposition of the fine, representatives from the Ministry finally turned up in the courtroom, but they were strange representatives. They knew nothing about the case and declined to identify themselves, complaining that chaos at the Ministry of Defence was the cause of all the problems. The upshot was that the court was again adjourned, this time to December 2.

Nina was in tears as she stood in the grim corridor of the court building.

“Why are they doing this?” she asked. “You would think they had done nothing wrong.”

How enviable to be Sergey Ivanov, head of our Ministry of Defence, which is so pitiless towards our people! Life is straight-forward for him. He doesn't have to bother himself with details, with mothers whose sons have died in that “war on international terrorism” about which he waxes so lyrical. He does not have to hear their voices or feel their pain. He knows nothing of the lives he has destroyed, nothing of the thousands of mothers and fathers abandoned by the system after their children have given their lives for it.

“Putin can't do everything!” the President's Russian admirers protest.

Indeed he can't. As President it is his job to think about methods, about approach. He is the person who shapes them. In Russia, people imitate the man at the top.

Well, we have described his approach to the Army. He is entirely to blame for the brutality and extremism instilled in both the Army and the State. Brutality is a serious infection that can easily become a pandemic. First perpetrated against people living in Chechnya, now it is used against

“our people”, as the patriotically inclined like to describe Russian citizens. Including those Russians who fought patriotically against those who experienced it first.

“Well, he made his choice and followed his destiny,” says Nina, wiping the tears from her face. Judge Bolonina stalks past in her robes, inscrutable. “But for heaven’s sake, these are human beings!”

Are they? I sometimes wonder whether Putin really is human, not just an icy, metallic effigy. If he is human, it doesn’t show.

Fifty-Four Soldiers, or Emigrating Home to Mum

People emigrate from Russia when staying any longer becomes life-threatening or provokes a massive onslaught by the State on their integrity and dignity. On September 8, 2002 this was precisely the situation in the Russian Army. Fifty-four soldiers gave up and tried to emigrate.

The training ground of No. 20 Guards Motorised Infantry Division is situated on the outskirts of the village of Prudboy in Volgograd Province. The men of No. 2 Section of Army Unit 20004 had been taken from their permanent base in the town of Kamyshin, also in Volgograd Province, to the training ground in Prudboy.

This seemed unexceptional: they were to receive training. Their instructors would be their father-figure commanding officers. On September 8, however, their father-figures, Lieutenant-Colonel Kolesnikov, Major Shiryaev, Major Artemiev, Lieutenant Kadiev, Lieutenant Korostylev, Lieutenant Kobets and Sub-Lieutenant Pekov, decided to conduct an inquiry that was outside their remit. When the soldiers had assembled on the parade ground, they were told there was to be an investigation to find out who had stolen a Fighting Reconnaissance and Landing Vehicle (FRLV) from the training ground during the night.

The soldiers later insisted that nobody had in fact stolen the FRLV. It was right there in its usual place in the divisional vehicle park. The officers were just feeling bored. They had been drinking for days, were probably feeling ill as a result and decided to divert themselves with a bit of bullying. It was not by any means the first time this sort of thing had occurred at the Kamyshin training ground, which has a bad reputation.

After the announcement a first batch of soldiers was led into the officers' tent: Sergeants Kutuzov and Krutov, Privates Generalov, Gursky and Gritsenko. The others were ordered to wait outside. Soon they heard the cries and groans of their fellow soldiers. The officers were beating them up. The first batch were thrown out of the tent. They told their comrades that the officers had beaten them on their buttocks and backs with the hafts of entrenching tools, and kicked them in the belly and ribs. This description was unnecessary. The signs of the beatings were clearly visible on the soldiers' bodies.

The officers announced they would now take a break. The lieutenant-colonel, two majors, three lieutenants and one sub-lieutenant would be having dinner, and they informed the remaining soldiers that anybody failing to voluntarily confess to having stolen the FRLV would be beaten in exactly the same way as those now sprawled on the grass outside their tent.

Their announcement made, the officers departed to take soup.

And the soldiers? They walked out. They mutinied, choosing not to wait like sheep for the slaughter. They left behind those who were on sentry duty, since deserting your post is a criminal offence involving a court martial and being sent to a disciplinary battalion, and also Kutuzov, Krutov, Generalov and Gritsenko, who were incapable of walking.

Forming up in a column, the soldiers marched out of the training ground towards Volgograd to get help.

It is a fair distance from Prudboy to Volgograd, almost 180 kilometres. The 54 soldiers marched the entire distance in an orderly manner, making no attempt to hide, on the verge of a busy highway along which officers of No. 20 Division were travelling to and fro. Not one vehicle stopped. No-one thought to ask where the soldiers were going without an officer, which is against Army regulations.

The soldiers marched until it grew dark. They lay down to sleep in the strip of woodland beside the highway. No-one came looking for them, despite the fact that when the lieutenant-colonel, two majors, three lieutenants and one sub-lieutenant emerged from the dining room after finishing their meal they discovered a marked thinning of the numbers of No. 2 Section. They had almost no-one left to command.

The officers went to bed, having no idea where the soldiers were for whom, by law, they were personally responsible, but knowing very well that in Russia no officer is ever punished for something that has happened to a private.

Early on the morning of September 9, the 54 soldiers set off again along the highway. And again Army officers drove insouciantly by.

This detachment of soldiers blessed with self-respect was on the march for one and a half days, and nobody from No. 20 Division missed them. On the evening of September 9 they marched quite openly into Volgograd. They were observed by the police, but again nobody took any interest in them.

The soldiers marched to the city centre.

“It was about 6.00 in the evening, and we were preparing to go home when the telephone rang suddenly. ‘Are you still open? May we come to see you?’” Tatyana Zozulenko, Director of the Volgograd Province Mothers’ Rights organisation, is telling me this. “I said, ‘Come right in.’ Of course, there was no way I was expecting what happened

next. Four young privates came into our small room and said there were 54 of them. I asked where the others were, and the boys led me down to the little basement of our own building. The rest were all standing there. I have worked in this organisation for eleven years but had never seen anything quite like that before. The first thing I worried about was where we were going to put them all. It was already evening. We asked them whether they had eaten. 'No,' they replied, 'not since yesterday.' Our members ran off to buy as much bread and milk as they could. The boys fell on the food like hungry dogs, but that was something we are used to. Soldiers are very badly fed in their units, they are chronically undernourished. When they had eaten, I asked, 'What do you want the result of your action to be?' They replied, 'We want officers who beat up soldiers to be punished.' We decided to put them up for the night in Mothers' Rights, all of them in together on the floor, to give us time to sleep on it. First thing in the morning we would go to the garrison prosecutor's office. I locked the door and went home. I live nearby and thought I could come round quickly if I was needed. At 11.00 that evening I phoned them, but nobody answered. I thought they must just be tired, probably asleep or afraid of answering the phone. I was awakened at 2.00 in the morning by our lawyer Sergey Semushin. He said someone who hadn't identified themselves had called to ask him to 'secure his premises'. I was round there within minutes. There were small military vehicles outside with officers in them. They did not introduce themselves. The soldiers had disappeared. I asked the officers where they were and got no reply."

The Mothers' Rights workers also discovered that their computer system with information about crimes committed in No. 20 Division had been broken into and stripped. They found a note under the carpet from a soldier saying they didn't know where they were being taken; they were being beaten and needed help.

There is a little more to add. The officers at the training ground “missed” their soldiers only after being telephoned by their superiors. This was late in the evening of September 9, after Tatyana Zozulenko had contacted journalists in Volgograd and information about the AWOL soldiers had first gone out on the airwaves. The regional staff headquarters naturally demanded an explanation from the officers. During the night, vehicles had been driven up to Mothers’ Rights, and all 54 soldiers had been removed to the guardhouse in the military commandant’s office. They were then returned to their unit under the supervision of the very officers whose bullying had made the soldiers leave the training ground in the first place. Tatyana Zozulenko asked Volgograd garrison prosecutor Chernov, whose duty it is to ensure that the law is upheld in the garrison’s units, why he had done that, and he replied without flinching, “Because these are *our* soldiers.”

That is the key phrase in the saga of the 54. “Our soldiers” means “our slaves”. Everything remains exactly as it always was in the Russian Army. A perverse understanding of the “honour of an officer” has constantly to be protected, and always takes precedence over the life and dignity of any private. The march from the Kamyshin training ground resulted, firstly, from the abhorrent Russian Army tradition that a soldier is an officer’s slave. An officer is always right and can treat a soldier exactly as he pleases. Secondly, however, it resulted from the sad fact that civilian control of Army procedures, about which much was said in the Yeltsin years and a draft law was even written, is now dead and buried. President Putin shares the Army’s traditional view of its officers’ rights and considers civilian monitoring of the armed forces completely inappropriate.

Underlying this story is the fact that No. 20 Division – the Rokhlin Division, so called after its commander, Lev Rokhlin, a hero of the First Chechen War, today a Deputy of the State

Duma - and particularly Unit 20004, have long been notorious in Volgograd, and indeed throughout Russia.

“For an entire year we sent information to the military prosecutor’s office, primarily to Mr Chernov, the garrison prosecutor, but also to everyone higher up the hierarchy, right up to the chief military prosecutor’s office in Moscow, about the crimes committed by the officers of Unit 20004,” Tatyana Zozulenko says. “In terms of the number of complaints we receive from soldiers, Unit 20004 is in first place. The officers beat their soldiers, extorting their ‘active service payments’ from those who have returned from Chechnya [No. 20 Division fought in both the First and Second Chechen Wars, and fights there to this day]. We have shouted about this from the rooftops, but nothing has happened. The prosecutor’s office has decided to hush everything up. The episode at the Kamyshin training ground is a wholly predictable result of Army officers’ lack of accountability.”[1](#)

A Few Shorter Stories

Russia has a military budget, of course, and there is plenty of discussion about it. A military lobby fights for new investment and orders are paid for out of the State coffers. This is standard international practice. One important detail that does distinguish us from other countries is that we are a major arms manufacturer and deal in arms throughout the world. It was Russia that gave the world the Kalashnikov assault rifle. For many Russians this is a source of pride.

I don’t, however, want to dwell on statistics. What I wonder is whether people are happy under the order President Putin has established. I consider that to be the main criterion for judging the actions of the leader of a state. Seeking an answer, I go to the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers and ask the women there: “Were your sons happy

to join the Army? Did it make real men of them?" I learn a great deal from their replies.

The detail matters more than the big picture. So, at least, it seems to me.

Misha Nikolaev lived in Moscow Province. His family saw him off to the Army in July 2001. He was posted to the border guards, to a frontier post ten hours' flying time from Moscow, at the village of Goryachy Plyazh on Anuchina Island in the Lesser Kurils. These are the islands that have so vexed Russian and Japanese politicians since the end of the Second World War.

While they argue, someone has to police the border. Misha was one of those doing that job. He lasted just six months at this outpost of the Russian Far East and died on December 22, 2001. By the autumn he had already been writing alarming letters home, having discovered festering sores on his body. He asked his family to send medicine: Vishnevsky's Balm, sulfanilamide, "in fact any medicines for treating suppuration, metapyrin, antiseptic, bandages and as much sticking plaster as possible. There is nothing here." His parents sent off the parcels without complaining, aware that our Army is underfunded and thinking things could not be all that bad, since Misha was still working as a cook in the Army's kitchens. If he was seriously ill, his parents supposed, he wouldn't be allowed anywhere near food preparation.

Misha did, however, continue to cook meals for the troops even when his skin was covered with suppurating sores. The pathologist who conducted his autopsy reported that the unfortunate soldier's tissues literally split open under the scalpel. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a Russian soldier rotted alive under the eyes of his officers, receiving no medical attention at all. What killed Misha was the complete irresponsibility of his superiors.

Dmitry Kiselev was posted to serve in the Moscow Province village of Istra. In Russia such a posting is regarded as a stroke of luck. He was close to Moscow; his parents, being Muscovites, could visit their son and battle their way through to his commanding officer if he needed help. This was not the Kuril Islands. That did not, however, save Dmitry from his officers' depravity.

Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Boronenkov, Private Kiselev's commanding officer, had a lucrative sideline. Nothing too unusual about that in today's Russian Army. People get up to all sorts of tricks as their wages don't amount to much. This particular lieutenant-colonel, however, traded in soldiers. Istra is a dacha settlement of second homes, and Boronenkov sold his soldiers to the owners of nearby plots of land as cheap labour. The soldiers worked only for food; their pay went straight to their commanding officer. This money-making scheme is by no means unique. Indeed it is widespread: soldiers are "sold" as unpaid labourers - that is, as slaves - to wealthy people for the duration of their military service. The officers use this unpaid labour as a means of bartering with people they think of as "useful". If an officer needs his car repaired and has no money, he herds a few soldiers along to the car-repair centre. They work there unpaid for as long as the centre requires, and in return the officer gets his car mended.

In late June 2002 it was the turn of the newly conscripted Dmitry Kiselev to be sold into slavery. Private Kiselev was sent to build a house for a certain Mr Karabutov, a member of the Mir Horticultural Association in Istra District. Initially he was building a house, but then he and seven other conscripts were required to dig a deep trench the length of the plot. On July 2 at 7.00 in the evening the sides of the trench collapsed, burying three boys, including Dmitry, who suffocated under the earth. His parents tried to have Lieutenant-Colonel Boronenkov brought to trial, but he