

Racist Violence Plagues Russian Army

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Vicious racist attacks have become an occupational hazard for army conscripts from the North Caucasus - who were once the most respected soldiers in the Russian forces

Just a month after he was called up for service in the Russian army, Lieutenant Nartkal Tekuzhev was found hanging by the neck from the ceiling of his barrack-room. The military authorities returned a verdict of suicide "for reasons unknown".

But Tekuzhev's father - a retired factory worker from Kabardino-Balkaria who had lost both legs in an industrial accident - made the long trip across Russia to his son's base and demanded an investigation.

His journey was not in vain. The inquiry unearthed ugly truths about life at the military installation where recruits from North Caucasian backgrounds were mercilessly bullied by the older hands. Tekuzhev had attempted to stand up for his ethnic kin and was consequently murdered by men under his command.

A military tribunal later found two conscripts guilty of killing Tekuzhev, then arranging his body to make it look like suicide. Both were sentenced to long jail terms in military penal colonies.

But this reluctant display of military justice is the exception rather than the rule. Almost all conscripts from the North Caucasus report constant victimisation and hazing during their army service. Very few of these cases are investigated - even when the brutality leads to death or suicide.

Another recruit from Kabardino-Balkaria, who asked not to be named, was hospitalised after being severely beaten by fellow conscripts in a St Petersburg army base.

The man later told his father that all non-Russian recruits in the unit were regularly attacked, deprived of food and sleep and forced to carry out menial tasks. The officers, he claimed, ignored the racist bullying and even encouraged it.

The father went to the military authorities and asked for his son to be transferred to a base in southern Russia. The officers agreed and he returned to Nalchik. Days later, the man was once again called to St Petersburg to discover that his son was back in hospital after another attack.

The man says his second son is due to be conscripted into the army this autumn but he will refuse to let him go.

This scenario is being repeated across the North Caucasus. Parents unwilling to let their children serve in the Russian armed forces are paying for exemption. There is even an unofficial price-list - 10,000 roubles (\$350) for a certificate stating that army service has been completed and 5,000-7,000 roubles for a medical exemption.

And applications to colleges of higher education have soared in recent years since young men of call-up age are granted a stay of execution for the duration of their studies.

But the documents aren't obtained clandestinely from black-marketeers or underground counterfeiters - they are bought straight from officers at the Military Commissariat, which regulates the call-up system.

The victims of barrack-room hazing blame the war in Chechnya and the growing wave of Russian nationalism which has swept through the army in its wake. The war has sparked widespread hatred for all Caucasian nationalities and a bitter distrust of the Islamic faith.

It is a far cry from the situation 15 to 20 years ago when Ossetians, Chechens, Dagestanis and Ingush were considered to be the most able soldiers in the Soviet armed forces. Recruits from the North Caucasus were favoured candidates for non-commissioned officers whilst their courage, loyalty and physical hardiness were legendary.

During the Communist era, 70 Ossetians were promoted to the rank of general or admiral while 34 were named Heroes of the Soviet Union -- the highest figures for any former Soviet republic.

For decades, boys in the North Caucasus were only considered to have reached manhood once they had completed their military service and most flocked eagerly to the recruiting stations.

Now, avoiding conscription is not only socially acceptable, it is even encouraged. And most military commanders admit privately that the ranks of the Russian army have been severely weakened as a result.

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