

Soldiers for Hire in North Ossetia

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Instead of serving the motherland, soldiers are being rented out as cheap labour.

Across North Ossetia, young conscript soldiers doing their military service can frequently be seen doing almost anything except their army duties.

Conscript Sergei looks exhausted. "I've just spent six months of my two-year term working on private construction sites," he told IWPR. "The officers hired us out to locals, usually the wealthy 'new Ossetians'. We built dachas or tended cattle for them.

"Some treated us like dogs, others were kinder - they bought us vodka, expensive cigarettes, and picked up whores for us in town. So I did my military duties with a spade in my hand. I'm not afraid to tell you this as I am about to be demobbed."

Sergei added dreamily, "I can't wait to go back to my parents and girlfriend in Kursk."

It is estimated that of the 10,000 or more Russian troops stationed in North Ossetia, several hundred are being used as free labour. Conscripts like Sergei who come from other parts of Russia are more vulnerable to exploits than locals who are close to home.

Colonel Alexander Tebloyev, the military prosecutor of the Vladikavkaz garrison, admitted that some soldiers were rented out by their unit commanders, but he told IWPR that the military authorities were clamping down.

"We are fighting this practice together with the command of the 58th Division and the interior ministry division stationed here," he said. "Those officers who indulge in this practice are being prosecuted. However, some commanders are still renting out conscripts to private employers or using them as labour on their own estates."

Colonel Tebloyev said dozens of criminal cases have been opened against officers, but any civilians involved were outside the jurisdiction of military courts.

Tebloyev described one of the cases his office had dealt with, "Battalion commander Igor Gorintsev routinely sent between 14 and 20 of his soldiers to work for private employers outside Vladikavkaz for many months. Our operatives found them near the village of Arkhonskaya near Vladikavkaz. Gorintsev was appropriately disciplined."

The business has been well worked out. After morning roll call and assignment of duties, a number of soldiers are detailed for outside work, and handed over to their temporary employers waiting outside the barracks. To avoid detection, the officer receives the money through a chain of persons.

Private entrepreneur Herman sees nothing wrong with using soldiers as free labour. "I make wall units and cabinetry," he told IWPR. "I need help and I find it at military units nearby. I pay the right people, and they send soldiers over. I save money this way, and it's easier to deal with military men."

He sees the trade as a good way of keeping costs down. "I give them one meal a day, and buy them vodka and cigarettes. That's all my expenses. My business is thriving," he said.

"It is perhaps inappropriate to use soldiers in civilian work, but I don't care as long as it's profitable. I used to work like that myself. Got to keep abreast of the times, you know."

But soldiers are sometimes injured or killed when working as hired labour. Tebloev recalls one such incident, "Ensign Jusoyev used a group of soldiers in various farm chores around his estate last autumn. One of them was killed by an electric shock. The ensign was given a jail sentence."

A Vladikavkaz regimental commander who would not give his name denounced the military high command for allowing the practice to continue.

"At our regiment, we are doing what we can to prevent it, but some of our officers still manage to pull it off, and military prosecutors are not doing enough to help," he said. "Young conscripts are here to perform their civic duty, not enrich their commanders."

An officer at the federal narcotics control agency, who declined to be named, told IWPR that soldiers sent to work outside their units often bring back drugs and distribute them among fellow conscripts.

Alexander, whose unit is stationed in Vladikavkaz, was made to work on a building site for a while, but was also subjected to another common form of abuse - forced by his officers to beg on the streets. If he and his fellow-conscripts did not raise 200 roubles - around seven dollars - they would be beaten on their return to base.

Local people are scandalised by the sight of Russian soldiers having to beg.

Svetlana Berezova, who trades at a Vladikavkaz market, said, "I've been selling merchandise here for five years, and seen many soldiers begging. These scrawny, dirty looking young men come to me, too. My son is in the army, and I really fear for him. What if he has to beg, too? I always give them food."

War veteran Major Ivan Semenchenko, told IWPR: "I served in the army for 22 years, and fought in the Great Patriotic War [1941-45]. It pains me no end to see young soldiers begging for change on the streets. Unkempt and hungry, they scavenge the streets and markets.

"I saw a group of conscripts toiling near our house for a month, building some car garages for local rich people. In the evenings, the employers tanked them up on vodka, and the soldiers would take to the streets begging for money. Who lets this kind of thing happen, I wonder?"

Tebloev said that while the practice of hiring out soldiers is on the wane in the area for which his office is responsible, violence is increasing among soldiers themselves. The 19th Rifle Division, which is involved in combat in Chechnya, is particularly infamous for violence, and no amount of measures taken by its commanders seem to work.

As he looks back on his time as a conscript, Alexander tells a story typical of many others, "My time is over; soon I'll be going home, but I'll never forget these two years. As young conscripts from central

Russia, we were beaten and humiliated from day one.”

He will never forget the violence he suffered. “In the discharge of my patriotic duty, my ribs were broken twice, and my nose once. My platoon commander broke four of my teeth. I tried to escape twice, but changed my mind and went back; I didn’t want to blemish my parents’ record. I suffered a lot of grief in the army, and I’m really glad I survived,” he said.

“If I have a son, I will make sure he never does military service.”

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