

Sayana Mongush (Kyzyl, Tuva)

“Don’t Send Your Sons to Serve in the Army, not for Anything”

A quote from the last letter of a Russian Army private.

The “Plus Inform” newspaper, February 16, 2005

The author is from Kyzyl, the capital of Tuva (Tyva), a republic of the Russian Federation, located in extreme southern Siberia, on the border with Mongolia. The story centers on two soldiers from Tuva who, having deserted, had been hiding in the basement of an apartment building, and were killed there by the police SWAT team. The circumstances of their death remain unclear, but, as Sayana Mongush writes in another article, when relatives of one of the soldiers, disobeying instructions, opened his coffin, they found a bullet wound in the back of his head.

Shoran Shanmak and Artysh Mongush left Tuva on May 20, 2004. The Motherland had called on them to discharge their civic duty. They were to return home in May 2006, wearing military insignia, including non-regulation, self-made frogs, with colorful scrapbooks, and with dashingly cocked peak-caps on their heads. There would be nothing of the kind. On February 14, 2004 two caskets would arrive from Abakan, with instructions for the parents that they are not to be opened.

After the successful half a year of training at the Chita training camp, Junior Sergeant Artysh Mongush, drafted from Bai-Khaaka and Private Shoran Shanmak, drafted from Ak-Turug, were sent, in January 2004, to the artillery unit where they were to serve. The border town of Kyakhta was their final destination, in more than one sense, as it turned out. Soon, parents of both Shoran and Artysh received identical telegrams: “Your son assaulted, on February 4th, the artillery park duty officer and appropriated his weapon; when apprehended, resisted the police. In response to the demand to surrender, he opened fire. He was killed in the exchange of fire.”

Who would share in the mother's pain? The military prosecutor? The draft commissioner? Those whom the mothers gave their sons, alive and well, with no guarantee of ever seeing them again?

The tax we pay to the Motherland is too heavy: to bring up a son, on the subsistence wages it pays us, and then to sacrifice him to her. And not even to her, but to the people who in the name of the Motherland manipulate us.

A few trained people who would know what the service will demand of them and enter it willingly would have sufficed to defend the Motherland. Clearly, the country cannot be made, for example, into the cultural center of the world by drafting every woman into ballet or piano classes. To get a result, some physical abilities are required, as a minimum. The mythical Motherland gains nothing from the wholesale draft of our sons to "pay their dues", it loses. Gain those who need something to keep busy with: the Ministry of Defense and all of its "vertical" appendages. This army, the army of bureaucrats, not the Motherland, needs sacrifices. Until the society succeeds in enforcing at least those guarantees that are already in the law: like alternative service, draft deferment for students, release from the draft for health reasons, as well as the promised already by Yeltsin voluntary service based on contract, Russia's mothers will raise their sons not for themselves but for use and upkeep of the generals. This is because Russia is the only country to preserve the heartless conscription system that tramples on rights and freedoms of the person who has been caught into the state serfdom.

Our soldiers are now all too often desert the army, even the elite and showcase units. So often, in fact, that the word "deserter" has become a codeword for the order to shoot to kill. No man – no problems. This is the foundation on which the state machinery of our country has been built, functions now, and will function, unfortunately, for a foreseeable future.

What was it that Artysh and Shoran have not managed to tell us, what was behind the SOS they have signaled by their action (or a misdemeanor, or even a crime, as the military would have us say), when running away, in a hopeless endeavor, a thousand kilometers from their home? The letters the boys wrote home in the beginning of April are just now reaching their parents. The boys did not know then that those letters will be their last.

In a day or two they would be shot dead in the basement of an apartment building in the garrison town Kyakhta-3 by the police SWAT team (*SOBR – Special Fast Response Unit*) dispatched from Ulan-Ude¹. Why the parents had not been brought in, or just contacted by the telephone, to resolve the situation, while the SWAT team was on its 24 hours train journey from Ulan-Ude to Kyakhta? There is no answer to that and there never will be. A photograph of the scene shows the bricks of the entrance way to the basement shattered by either a grenade explosion or by a heavy rifle fire. Which was it is not important: it is hardly possible to recreate the course of events and to call to the account the one who, without the due process of law, ordered the boys killed. Because nobody needs the truth, except the parents.

What is most striking in the letters Shoran had written to his aunt, Nina Burbuzhap, deputy headmaster of a Kyzyl-Dag high school, is not even a restraint description of beatings, humiliation, and hunger but his use of proper, and nowadays rarely used, forms of addressing the elders and the relatives: *ugbai, daai-avai, cheenin, dunmalarym*. It appears his writing reflected his manners: polite and cultivated. The obscene language he quotes in his letters to illustrate the way people are addressed in the army is often misspelled: he obviously was not familiar with these words.

Shoran repeatedly asks his aunt not to send her sons to serve. “I write my parents that everything is all right, because I don’t want them get distressed. Don’t show this letter to anyone! Don’t send your sons to serve in the army, not for anything! Your nephew, Shoran.”

Shoran’s mother teaches in the elementary school of Ak-Turug. His father operates agricultural machinery. A hardworking family raising now 5 children. Shoran was the sixth. He dreamed to enroll in a college for medical professionals and wanted to get his army service over with, so that it would not interfere with his studies. “I thought the army is cool”, he wrote, “but it has turned out it is a mess.”

Artysh Mongush’s mother is a widow. She has been raising her three sons by herself. She planned to take her younger sons to visit the older in March, when the school vacations would begin. She had no inkling as to what was happening to her son. Being too busy with her job as an operating room nurse in the local hospital, she had missed television reports on the shooting of the soldiers that were running for two days, and received the telegram only on the 8th of February.

¹ The capital of Buryatiya, a Russian Federation republic neighboring Tuva.

Fingering her son's last letter she says that only now she has come to understand the cautious hints his letters offered. Her son asked to send a little money, instead of the parcels she had been sending him. Apparently, he was being robbed of the goods she had been sending. He wrote he needs postal envelopes, though she would stick a few in every letter she had sent him. He wrote he had changed his mind about signing the contract to stay on in the army.

Artysh graduated a culinary arts school and worked, before he was drafted, as a cook in a kindergarten. He was a good cook and used to bake cakes for his grandmother. She lives in Kyzyl and was supposed to accompany him to the conscription center. But he ran there by himself, at 6 in the morning: this was how much he wanted to serve.

“He was such a tender and handsome boy. But he would not let anybody push him around. If everything was all right with them there, why did they run away carrying arms? Why would a person who wanted so much to be in the army run away? Had he refused to serve and had been drafted forcibly, we would have understood. But he wanted to be there so much...”

It looks like the Ministry of Defense made it their goal to keep the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia busy. Each mistake it makes results in perishing, killing, maiming, or disappearance of soldiers. The Committee keeps thick file folders stuffed with documents and correspondence, each helping in efforts of a mother to find if not justice, then at least the remains of her son to bury them properly. 5 years ago Olesya Oyun's lost her son to the army. Allegedly, he went out to relieve himself, had not returned, and is missing since. Her fruitless search for her son eventually put her in charge of the regional Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. She knows by heart every trick the officials use to get away with a formal reply, can predict reactions of official bodies: she has seen it all a thousand times, as in a recurring nightmare. She talks professionally, since defending children from the Motherland has become a profession, with the military prosecutor office, with commanders of military bases, and with investigators. As the result of these talks, this miniature but undaunted woman has made many an official observe the law and to do everything the state commissioned them to do, but does not control whether they do it or not.

“The soldiers are returning home invalids, but are not paid insurance; parents are forced to pay for delivery of bodies of their sons, compensation to the relatives for those killed is not paid.” says Olesya Oyun and shows files of the cases in which rights of soldiers and their parents have been successfully defended.

The monitoring conducted by the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers shows the military units garrisoned in the towns of Borzya and Kyakhte, and in the Krasnoyarsk region's town of Zheleznogorsk as the worst to serve in: these are the places that are most often complained about by both the servicemen and by their parents.

“Non regulation personnel interactions”² exacerbated by ethnic prejudice make conditions there unbearable. Zheleznogorsk became a notorious place after there was an attempt to drown draftees from Tuva in the river, with cries “Let's drown the slit-eyes in the Yenisei³”. Through joint efforts of the local branches of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (and they exist in almost every region of Russia), a unit had been formed, in the Krasnoyarsk region, to which they try and transfer the soldiers drafted from Tuva who have become victims of abuse. «They serve there successfully and return home without having gone through any major incidents”, says Olesya Oyun.

There are 6 soldiers on the Committee's list of draftees from Tuva who have gone missing. One of them, Sholban Oyun, served at the military unit #90709, in the town of Vedyaevo of the Murmansk region⁴ and went missing on December 30, 2002. A charred body had been found but not identified. Oyun's parents lack money to exhume and identify the remains.

Each of them had been labeled a deserter, which for the army is a convenient charge: no need to expend money and time to investigate their disappearance.

Another Committee's list is the list of those whose death has been proved a homicide. Eker Suge-Maadyr died in Irkutsk, where he served in the military unit #93855, from jaundice, according to the pathology report. However, a new examination proved that that the death resulted from beating.

Eker Ottug-ool was killed on July 6, 2003 by three officers who beat him cuffed to the radiator. The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation convicted each to a year of suspended prison term.

Ai-Kherel Sarplar was killed on his birthday, on September 21, 2003, in the Kursk Region, military unit #23243, by a drunk second year soldier.

² A common shorthand for various abuses committed either by officers, or NCOs, or by the second year privates. This may include beating, humiliation, coercion to perform various services.

³ The world's fifth longest river flows from Mongolia to the Arctic Ocean.

⁴ Vedyaevo is the base of Russia's strategic submarines fleet on the North Sea.

Only the most recent case, the case of a draftee from Kyzyl gone missing, has had a happy end. The soldier had been sold by his commander into slavery, but managed to call his mother and told her that he was not serving in the army anymore, but working at a job instead. Through joint efforts of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Kyzyl, Moscow, and Groznyy, the boy was found and, in July of the last year, taken back home to Tuva. These are our present day realities: a soldier has a market value, he can be sold, traded, given as a security, or killed if he causes troubles. And there is always a way out: to declare him either a deserter or missing.

As the politicians see it, our sacred duty as mothers is to supply, without interruptions, the raw material for the state. Nobody gives a thought to the notion that parents may have plans for their children that are different from the plans of the General Staff. For example they may count on their children's support in their later years, or hope to live in their grandchildren. But, first, they receive summons from the draft commissioner office, and then a state issue casket with the body for which the state has no further use.

On Friday, February 18, at 1 P.M., in the Theater of Music and Drama, a charitable marathon event will be held by the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia to create the "Fund to Aid Soldiers' Mothers and the Servicemen in Distress".

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