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Russian Conscripts Can't Be Sent Into Battle. This One Was. And He's Not Happy About It.

By [RFE/RL's Siberia.Realities](#)

In December 2023, along with tens of thousands of other 18-year-old men, Aleksandr, from the Siberian city of Ulan-Ude, was called up for mandatory military service in the Russian armed forces.

Four months later, and nearly 7,000 kilometers to the west, he found himself digging foxholes and infantry trenches along Russia's border with Ukraine. And not long after that, he found himself cowering in those very trenches, facing off against Ukrainian troops and kamikaze drone attacks.

"It turns out that I was sent to a combat zone against the law, without asking," he [said in an interview with RFE/RL's Siberian Realities](#) last month.

The plight of Aleksandr -- who asked that his surname not be used to avoid prosecution by police -- illustrates a major third rail of Russian politics, something President Vladimir Putin has strenuously avoided since launching the Ukraine invasion in February 2022.

Conscripts in combat.

With the invasion nearing its 40th month, Russian troops continue to suffer eye-watering casualties: upward of 750,000 dead and wounded, according to Western estimates, and climbing as this year's spring fighting season kicks into high gear.

Despite the toll, Russia has managed to sustain its tempo of operations by relying on an elaborate recruitment system of mobilized reserves, volunteers, private mercenaries, and even prison inmates, plus regular

units. Sky-high wages and benefits for combat service have resulted in a steady flow of men sent into battle.

But Russian law forbids conscripts -- men, mostly around 18 years of age, completing one year of mandatory military service -- from serving in combat zones. First and foremost, that means Ukraine.

Putin has promised repeatedly that conscripts would not be sent to fight. But they can be enlisted to do rear-guard tasks such as logistical or construction work away from active combat zones.

They can also be persuaded -- or coerced -- into signing full volunteer combat contracts after just four months of basic training. Often, the conscripts do not fully understand what they're signing, [activists and lawyers said](#).

Last summer, Ukrainian forces staged a cross-border invasion into Russia's Kursk region, overwhelming the lightly defended border and border guard troops, National Guard units, and other troops. Dozens of conscripts were also captured or went missing during the invasion. At least 25 were killed, [according to the news outlet Vyorstka](#).

Aleksandr was lucky he wasn't among them.

Military prosecutors and officials from the local military recruitment center could not be reached for comment on Aleksandr's case.

'We Quickly Dug Small Trenches And Then Just Sat There'

Aleksandr, who spoke to RFE/RL from the Yaroslavl region, northeast of Moscow, said he was conscripted in the fall 2023. He was inducted into service as a private that December, initially spending most of his time in the Amur region, along the border with China.

He was assigned to a unit of the Railway Troops, a logistical force devoted to running the trains the military relies heavily on across its 11 time zones.

"As far as training goes, we did target practice a couple of times and that was it. There was no special training," he said.

In April 2024, an unknown number of conscripts from his training base were sent to a muster point and then shipped off to Bryansk, a Russian region bordering Ukraine.

He said that initially he and his company of eight men were ordered to dig bunkers for the Border Guards, a separate military unit devoted to

guarding Russia's border. He said they saw not a single volunteer soldier -- known as "kontraktiki" -- or mobilized soldier, known as "mobiki."

"When they threw us over the top, there was no one in the area except conscripts. Even our squad leader was a conscript like us, the other seven. He just studied at a military school before the army," he said.

Last August, when the Ukrainian troops surprised Russian forces, invading the neighboring Kursk region, Aleksandr's entire battalion was in Bryansk. On August 6, he said, his unit was ordered on alert; two other companies rushed to join Aleksandr's company.

"We quickly dug small trenches and then just sat there. That's it," he said.

Senior officers, Aleksandr said, ordered conscripts to forward positions, closest to the border. Behind them, in the second lines of defense, were professional soldiers and better equipment.

Conscripts, he said, were forbidden from making any sort of unplanned retreat.

"Once we were under fire for several hours. We were sent on a scouting mission, and then the Ukrainian armed forces came out. We couldn't run back; our own people would shoot us for giving away our location. We lay down and waited for several hours," he said.

A Ukrainian kamikaze drone detonated close to his position, he said, giving him a concussion -- his fifth.

Conscripts' Gray Zone

Russian officials have refused to acknowledge what is more or less an open secret, particularly among military families: that conscripts indeed have been caught up, deliberately or negligently, in combat along the border with Ukraine.

There's a legal loophole to the ban on sending conscripts into battle. After just four months, the young men are allowed to sign contracts, effectively volunteering for full duty, including combat deployment.

However, officers and military recruiters routinely pressure, and coerce, conscripts to sign contracts, without providing full disclosure or disclaimer or other relevant information, activists, lawyers, and even parents have complained.

Last October, several conscripts from a Russian tank division received 305,000 rubles (\$3,600) **in compensation after they complained they signed fake contracts with the Defense Ministry.**

That same month, Aleksandr, who did not sign any such volunteer contract, said he was wounded again when a fragment of a kamikaze drone hit him in his left leg. He was transferred off the front line and hospitalized at a military clinic back in Borzja, where his unit was originally dispatched from.

Military doctors were reluctant to accurately diagnose his injury, he said, since he was a conscript and the injury was a combat injury, which would contravene legal prohibitions. That meant he was ineligible also for an additional payment for suffering a war injury.

He was released from conscription on December 10, 2024, a year to the day when he entered service.

"At first, I couldn't walk at all," he said. "I could only hop as best I could. It healed a bit, then I bought a cane, and at least I started walking."

"They kept me in the hospital until I was demobilized. I was left disabled. And also without money," he said. "I also have panic attacks. When there are bangs, I immediately start looking around for drones."

He now said he plans to file a formal complaint with the military prosecutor's office, both to have his combat deployment recognized and for payment for his injury.

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