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RUSSIA

War In Ukraine Poses 'Terrible Threat' For Russia's Saami People, But Solutions Are Few

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By RFE/RL's North.Realities

He's remembered on the Russian social-media platform VKontakte as "a son, husband, father." But 43-year-old Yevgeny Stanovoi, a deputy platoon commander in Russia's elite 61st Marine Infantry Brigade, was also part of a trend -- another native of an indigenous-populated, impoverished village in Russia's Far North, Lovozero, who joined the military and was killed in Ukraine.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has taken an unknown number of men -- draftees, volunteers, and prisoners recruited by the mercenary group Wagner -- away from the Lovozero district, a land of tundra, tumble-down settlements of wooden homes, and reindeer herders on Russia's subarctic Kola Peninsula, a few hours southeast of the Barents Sea port of Murmansk.

It is an exodus that adds to the challenges clouding the future of the Saami community in Russia, where their numbers are already substantially smaller than in neighboring Norway, Finland, and Sweden.

"The war changed everything a lot," commented Lovozero resident Valentina Sovkina, a Saami activist and one of the few still willing to speak out publicly amid a spiraling state **clampdown on free speech** in which criticism of the war is a crime. "This is a terrible threat for everyone, and especially for minorities."

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Lovozero, which is known as Russia's "Saami capital," had been losing residents for at least two decades. Now below 2,000, the population of the village, where members of the Komi and Nenets communities also live, has declined by about 19 percent in the past 20 years, according to official figures.

Mentioned in the 16th century as a church burial ground, by the mid-20th century Lovozero had become the site of Soviet attempts to settle the Saami, traditionally nomadic reindeer herders.

Today, only 1,500 Saamis remain in Russia, estimates Sovkina, the speaker of the Kola Peninsula's Saami parliament, a consultative body, and a member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

"I would say that 3 percent of the adult population has died" in Russia's war against Ukraine, she said. "That may not be many for some people, but for our tiny nation, this is a lot."

The Russian news outlet Mediazona and the BBC's Russian service, which have a joint project seeking to count and identify Russian soldiers killed in the war, said that 212 people from the Murmansk region had been killed since the start of the invasion, as of September 22. The research did not specify the ethnicity or the place of residence of those killed, and the Russian military death toll is widely believed to be substantially higher than the number confirmed by journalists.

As recently as a few months ago, Murmansk region mayors and the governor, Andrei Chibis, were releasing information about soldiers killed in Ukraine and holding "pompous funerals" for them, a Lovozero resident who did not want their name published because of the sensitivity of the topic pointed out. The last announcement of a soldier's death on the regional news site Nord-News.ru dates from late July.

"Now it's like they're playing mum, trying not to advertise [the deaths]," she said.

Stanovoi's personal acquaintances in Lovozero and relatives declined to speak about his death with RFE/RL's North.Realities, but some spoke about his background.

The officer left Lovozero for Murmansk, headquarters of Russia's Arctic military forces, right after he graduated from high school, initially working as a cargo loader and driver at a meat store before enlisting in the Northern Fleet's 61st Marine Brigade in 2015. He eventually became a deputy platoon commander and took part in the war in Syria, according to acquaintances, who requested anonymity.

It was a typical career path for a Lovozero resident.

The village, its entrance marked by a rusty reindeer on a Soviet-era sign missing Lovozero's final "o," has few jobs apart from reindeer husbandry, an **increasingly rare** expertise. Fishing, hunting, and seasonal tourism provide some relief, but unemployment stands at nearly **double** Russia's official rate of 3.3 percent.

Average monthly salaries in the district of which Lovozero is the administrative center are just under 55,230 rubles (\$580), only three-quarters of the national average, according to official data.

To find a living wage, locals often head to Murmansk, St. Petersburg, or, before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, found jobs on Norwegian fishing boats.

The military is another option: Its promised -- **though not always paid** -- salaries of 195,000 rubles (\$2,535) for recruits to fight in Ukraine are over 3 1/2 times the average monthly wage in the Lovozero district.

With no medical clinic, persistent violent crime, and its first gas station only now opening for business, Lovozero could find it hard to compete.

One group of indigenous activists and community leaders expelled from Russia, the International Committee of Indigenous Peoples of Russia (ICIPR), **said** that the participation of indigenous soldiers was "the war's most direct and unfortunate impact" on indigenous peoples in Russia.

For Lovozero, still another controversial impact could occur within the next few years.

The mountain mass on which its district is located contains "**unique reserves**" of rare metals, according to local geologists. As international sanctions for Russia's invasion of Ukraine cut into imports, Russian firms are preparing to start large-scale mining of lithium, platinum, and palladium in the area by 2027.

One of the companies, Polar Lithium, a joint venture set up by Russia's state-run atomic energy company Rosatom and mining giant Nor Nickel, expects to add 1,000 local jobs to produce 45,000 tons of lithium carbonate and hydroxide per year at Kolmozerskoye, a lithium deposit that contains roughly 19 percent of Russia's entire reserves.

A second company, Arctic Lithium, has already begun pilot production at another lithium-deposit site, Polmostundrovskoye.

A third, Fedorovo Resources, a Murmansk-region-backed firm, plans to invest over 60 billion rubles (\$618 million) in palladium mining.

Concerns about these ventures' long-term environmental impact -- like worries about the war -- exist, but are largely kept silent. Their speech stifled, some Saami activists have emigrated to Norway, which has reportedly granted them political asylum.

What public criticism persists is on social media.

Some in Lovozero fear that endangered lichens that are the principal food source for the 20,000 reindeer at the region's main employer, the agricultural cooperative Tundra, will be destroyed.

Others complain that a survey conducted by ethnologists for Polar Lithium to assess local concerns about the mining venture questioned only 50 Saami residents.

Polar Lithium has pledged to "to support and develop" the area's indigenous people and to inform and involve them, free of pressure, in decisions about its mining project.

The chief engineer of Nornickel's Department of Federal and Regional Programs, Vasily Zakharov, told RFE/RL's North.Realities that "the dialogue is constructive" and that "consultations" are ongoing with the Kola Peninsula's indigenous inhabitants.

But though public hearings have been held about these projects, one former Lovozero resident who has left Russia and did not want her name published said that residents would not share their "tensions" at such gatherings.

"People are intimidated, depressed -- it's a discussion with a gun to their heads," she said.

Written by Elizabeth Owen. This story is based in part on reporting by correspondents from RFE/RL's North.Realities on the ground in Russia. Their names are being withheld for their protection
