

Russian rights activists say 3500 Russian soldiers have died in Putin's war on Ukraine

Ukraine

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More than 3500 Russian soldiers have died in Ukraine in the course of Vladimir Putin's war against the Ukrainian people, according to Elena Vasilyeva of Murmansk. That figure is roughly one quarter of the number Moscow claimed it lost in the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

By Paul Goble* for "Windows on Eurasia" More than 3500 Russian soldiers have died in Ukraine in the course of Vladimir Putin's war against the Ukrainian people, according to Elena Vasilyeva of Murmansk. That figure is roughly one quarter of the number Moscow claimed it lost in the Soviet war in Afghanistan. But Russian media have ignored or downplayed these human losses – Vasilyeva's figure has been distributed only via Facebook and Ukrainian outlets so far, a pattern that has allowed Russians to believe that the war has not touched them in this most immediate and tragic way (

nr2.com.ua/News/world_and_russia/V-Ukraine-pogiblo-bolee-35-tysyach-rossiyskih-voennyh-79981.html). In "Novyye izvestiya," Valentina Melnikova, the head of the Union of

Soldiers' Mothers Committees, says that as a result of claims by Moscow officials that Russian losses are much smaller, "Russians think that the war in Ukraine doesn't concern them" (

newizv.ru/society/2014-09-15/207668-predsedatel-sojuza-komitetov-soldatskih-materej-valentina-melnikova.html). That situation, she suggests, is not simply a reflection of not having the facts on hand.

Even Russians who have access to the Internet where information is available "are not taking this [war] to their hearts because they have the sense that all this is virtual, that it doesn't concern them, especially since the sources of information are so doubtful." The

Soldiers' Mothers leader said she had expected the situation to begin to change when prisoners began to be exchanged and returned home but "no, everything is still quiet." Melnikova says that she "doesn't know" why this is the case: "I am not a

psychiatrist." But it is disturbing, and she reports that when she visits military units, anyone who begins to question what the Kremlin is doing in Ukraine is cursed and shouted down, something that to date keeps people in line. The Soldiers' Mothers leader said she had expected the

situation to begin to change when prisoners began to be exchanged and returned home but "no, everything is still quiet." And she took issue with the statement of Lev Shlosberg of the Pskov oblast Duma that Russian soldiers are unhappy with the situation and don't want to fight in Ukraine. If that is the case, Melnikova asks, what is preventing officers and soldiers from filing a report: They are under no obligation to fight "without a legal order." In 1994 when the first Chechen war began, many soldiers and officers did just that, and her organization published more than 6500 of such complaints. "But now – people do not understand what is happening," and their reaction has been strikingly passive even as losses mount up and cannot be hidden or effectively denied.

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*The commentary above is from Paul Goble's "Windows on Eurasia" series and appears here with the author's permission. Contact Goble at: paul.goble@gmail.com. Submit commentary for publication in UBO on any subject related to Ukraine to: editor@ukrainebusiness.com.ua.