

## **A Russian Blackwater? Putin's Secret Soldiers in Ukraine and Syria** **World**

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**While Ukraine's military has many honored volunteers fighting to defend their border, Russia's expeditionary forces often are contractors fighting for pay, and dying in silence.**

By [ANNA NEMTSOVA](#) for the Daily Beast, Jan 2, 2018 KYIV—Fierce fighting between Kremlin-backed militias and Ukrainian forces has intensified and is now [the worst it has been since last February](#). Soviet-era GRAD rockets started raining on the streets and houses of Novoluhanskote in eastern Ukraine right before the holiday season. Once again with every day that passes the war that has killed more than 10,000 people is sending victims to the hospitals and cemeteries on [both sides of the front line](#). But while public treatment for Ukraine's soldiers is marked by respect and honor, Russia has kept deaths—and even the names of those soldiers recruited to fight in Ukraine—a secret, while those sent to Syria have been almost as anonymous.

Ukraine's ex-soldiers take part in [Invictus Games](#), in public discussions, training and rehabilitation programs much like their counterparts in the United States or Canada. On a recent afternoon, a few young men gathered to chat about life after war at Pizza Veterano, a cozy café near Independence Square in the heart of Kyiv. The club was founded and operated by Donbas veterans.

The friends were from *Pobratimy* or the Brothers-in-Arms group, one of multiple Ukrainian NGOs organizing training and rehabilitation programs for war veterans. Regulars at the place, the activists ordered a delicious prosciutto and mushroom pizza made by war veterans for war veterans. A handsome 23-year-old ex-soldier named Yurii Dmytrenko lost a part of his left leg in Donbas. "But I found unique experience and knowledge and huge support both from the state and from civil society," Dmytrenko told The Daily Beast, looking down at the table's glass top and the shell casings arrayed beneath. Dmytrenko had volunteered to join a Ukrainian unit in Donbas (eastern Ukraine) in 2014, when he was 20 years old. His mother, who lived in Poltava, far from the fighting, had no clue that her son traveled right to the front lines. "People respect us for defending our country," said Dmytrenko. "Some young guys who have not been to the war tell me: 'Thank you for going there, so I could stay.'"

A young volunteer named Ivona Kostyna smiled at Dmytrenko from across the table. "None of these guys coming back from the war want people to feel sorry for them, but they need a program to recover from PTSD, to find jobs, to go back to normal life," Kostyna said. "Ukraine will deal with war veterans for decades." In the meantime, he said, "We build partnerships and cooperation with veteran communities in the U.S. and in Canada, which is very helpful." Not all Ukrainian veterans are happy about their government—dozens have been protesting in a [camp set up outside the Ukrainian parliament](#) for weeks, but most ex-soldiers feel they have public support and a chance to be heard. On a recent night at the protest site ex-soldiers warmed up by the fire, drank tea, and chatted quietly. The protesters living in tents outside the parliament were planning one more "veche," a mass demonstration in support of President Petro Poroshenko's impeachment. That situation would be unimaginable in Moscow. RUSSIAN VETERANS of modern wars serving abroad do not see much public support, nor do they receive much help from independent civil groups, simply because their participation in

the conflicts abroad often is a state secret. At his annual press conference earlier this month President Vladimir Putin admitted for the first time since the first days of the war that there are members of the Russian military in Ukraine, but denied that they were the same as regular troops. "We never said there were not people there who carried out certain tasks including in the military sphere," Putin said. Ruslan Leviyev and his Conflict Intelligence Team are a unique non-commercial group based in Moscow and investigating real stories of Russian soldiers fighting in foreign countries. "If in Ukraine soldiers are treated as national heroes, Russian recruits often die anonymously," Leviyev told The Daily Beast. "The society feels indifferent to the numbers of casualties in the Russian military, to how many soldiers are wounded." A few weeks ago Svetlana, a 24-year-old woman from the Krasnodar region contacted Conflict Intelligence Team, she wanted to know how her fiancé, 30-year-old Sergei, had died in Syria. [⋮]  
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