

LET'S GET NAKED



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STORIES

'Everything here smells like the dead now' In Russia's Buryatia, soldiers killed in Ukraine are buried daily. Has this changed how locals feel about the war?

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As Russia's military casualties in Ukraine continue to mount, Buryatia has emerged as the country's second-hardest hit region in terms of losses. The only place losing more men is Dagestan. Nevertheless, the speeches at the near daily funerals in Ulan-Ude and other Buryatian cities still resound with support for Russia's war against "Nazis" and gratitude for the fallen soldiers not being "left behind," but shipped home for burial. At the end of April, the local magazine People of the Baikal published a report about how Buryatia is burying their dead soldiers, and what their loved ones and the regional authorities think about these losses. With their permission, Meduza has translated their article in full.

They built the archery range a year ago. You can make out its yellow roof and white-and-blue tiled facade from afar, against a backdrop of wooden barracks, tilting over from age, and portable toilets. This is Buryatia's most important archery range; archery is an extremely popular traditional sport here. It is where children are trained, where athletes from other cities and regions come to compete.

Since the beginning of March, the main auditorium of the archery range has been repurposed to hold funerals for soldiers killed in Ukraine. The children keep shooting, training behind a wall, in another part of the building. The door to the training hall is only a few meters away from the door through which the coffins are carried out.

"Parents aren't happy they've turned the athletic center into a funeral home," says Tatyana, whose son is training in archery here. "The room the kids practice in smells like dead bodies now, too. Everything here smells like the dead now."

The archery range is by the side of the road, and traffic patrollers line the path to it all the way back to the highway exit. There are no police at the building's entrance, but in two days, they will start standing here, too. People who come to the funerals are greeted by associates from the Mayor's Office, which is responsible for organizing these ceremonies. They ask them, "Who have you come to pay your respects to?"

The local media outlets wrote that on March 28, the archery range would hold the funeral of soldier Naidal Tsyrenov. But at the appointed time, four coffins arrived at the athletic complex.

There were no signs or photographs next to the coffins, but the people from the Mayor's Office could say which coffin had who in it.

The first one held 24-year-old Naidal Tsyrenov, the captain of his school's KVN team and 2016's Student of the Year. He served as a military medic. Naidal's hands lay folded over his chest in his gray uniform jacket. One of them had been bandaged.

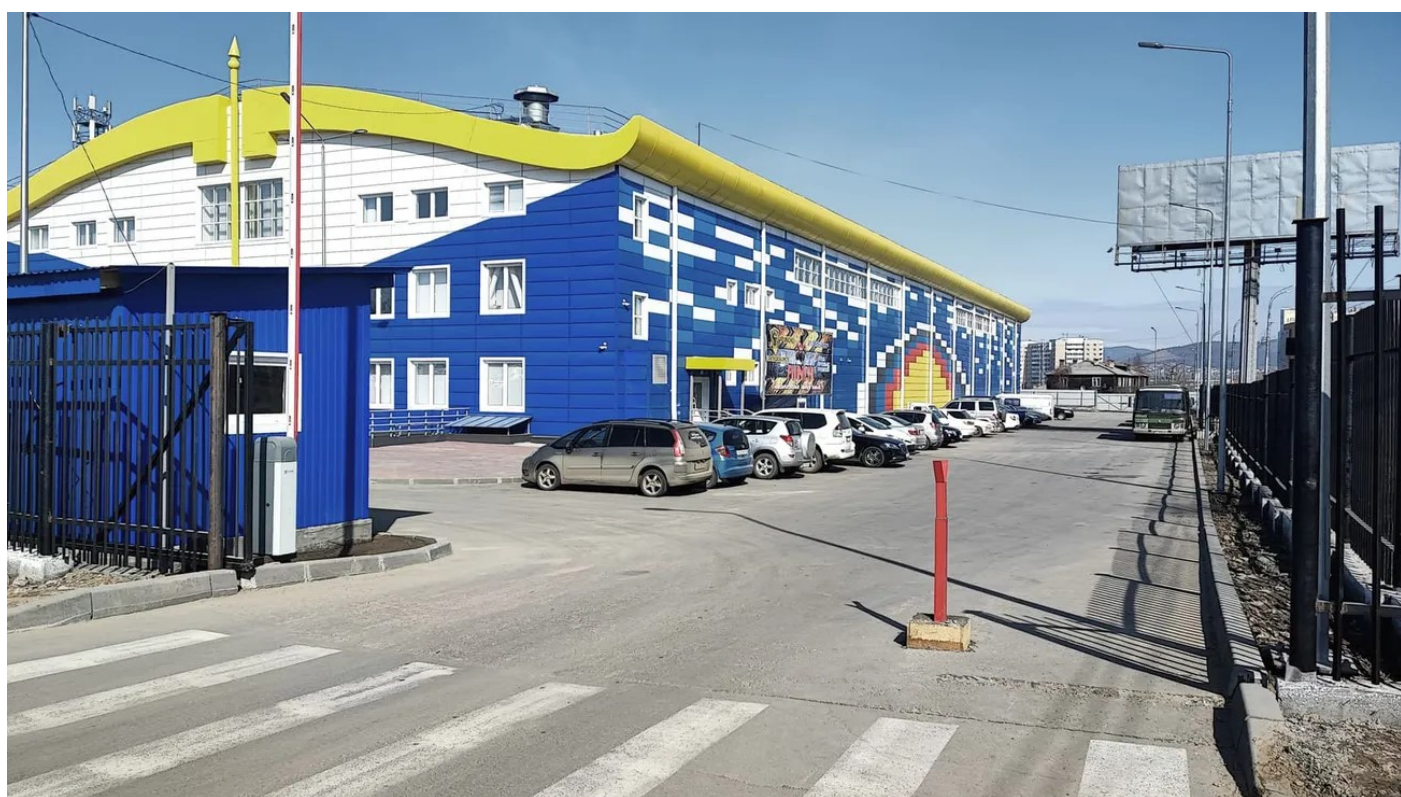
Thirty-five year old Bulat Odoyev lay in the second coffin. He'd served in the Fifth Tank

him why he was going. And he'd say, 'How can I abandon my brothers?,' said a woman named Olga, Bulat's cousin's wife.

Zhargal Dashiyev lay in the third coffin. He'd left behind two daughters and a pregnant wife.

Finally, in the fourth one, was 20-year-old Vladislav Kokorin, who'd grown up in an orphanage before getting adopted.

Relatives stood next to each coffin. But there was hardly anyone near Vladislav's coffin. During the ceremony, one of the organizers approached it and draped the dead man in a thin blue cloth, pulling it up to his chest. Then she put portraits of the men up in front of each coffin. The photographs were also without any labels — everyone presumably knew who they had lost. There were no strangers in the room.



Elena Trifonova

The coffins stood in the part of the room where children usually shot bows and arrows. The people who'd come to pay their final respects sat in the bleachers. Some of them stood in the passageways, there wasn't enough room for everybody to sit. In fact, the main auditorium of the athletic center was packed to capacity — at least 600 people had come.

Soldiers stood at alert at the heads of the coffins. Their backs straight, machine guns pressed to their chests. Their young faces were reminiscent of high school seniors' doing their ceremonial guard shifts at the Eternal Flame. Some of the soldiers were crying. They couldn't wipe their tears, so they just ran down their cheeks.

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Young men from poor regions Mediazona journalists investigate open data on Russian troop losses in Ukraine

12 days ago

A table stood between the coffins and the people who'd come to the funeral. Four lamas in traditional burgundy Buddhist robes sat at the table. Three of the dead men had been Buddhist and were receiving Buddhist funeral rites. There was also a Russian Orthodox priest there, but he did not perform any rites over Vladislav Kokorin, he just stood to the side with the officials.

The lama's table had a peacock feather in a vessel decorated with a red and yellow fringe. An open book lay on a red cloth. The lamas sang funeral prayers in Tibetan, which they read from the book. Next to the book there was a Zula, a Buddhist lamp with a flame rising up from it. Incense smoked on a small copper dish.

The suffocating fragrance of the incense mixed with the nauseating smell of the corpses. The dead take a long time to transport — sometimes there's a month or even two between their deaths on the battlefield and their funerals. It was difficult to breathe in the auditorium.

The lamas heads nodded to the cadence of their songs. Through the black and gray bristle on their heads, you could clearly make out the many scars on their skin.

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coffins to bid their loved ones farewell. Relatives also circled the dead, stopping to press their lips to the soldiers' boots or the walls of their coffins.

Как в Бурятии хоронят военных, погибших в Украине



How soldiers killed in Ukraine are buried in Buryatia
Lyudi Baikala

There were no sounds of crying. Buddhists are forbidden from crying at funerals or intensely mourning their dead at all. After death, the soul is supposed to pass through a celestial path and return to the Earth 49 days later in a new body. Tears block the path and delay the dead on their journey.

The following day, Amgalan Tudupov and Eduard Zhidyayev would have their funerals at the archery range. Two more men would arrive two days later, 23-year-old Bator Dondokov and Anton Khatkheyev. "The parents of one of the dead soldiers went up to us and said, 'You're so lucky! At least he came back to you whole. All we got was a head and two hands,'" said one of Bator Dondokov's relatives.

Another soldier, 22-year-old Zorigto Khotsayev, would be buried in the village of Alla, where he was born, on March 28. Ten Buryatian soldiers would be buried over the course of a single week.

After Bator's funeral, three of his friends signed up to fight in Ukraine. At one of the ceremonies, acting commander of the 36th Army Colonel Sokol said, "On behalf of everyone serving, I'd like to say that we will avenge them, for our mission is righteous. Victory will be ours."

The memorial service began after the rituals.

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Russian then in Buryat. “They died so that Russia could be great. So that the bloodshed in Ukraine would come to an end.”

“They died protecting the freedom and future of our country,” said Ulan-Ude Mayor Igor Shutenkov.

“No one has ever defeated Russia. And nobody ever will!” said Tsyren Dozrzhiev, the vice speaker of the People’s Khural [Buryatia’s parliament].

“The paratroopers took their final leap, into the sky. It’s incredibly painful. In eternal memory,” said acting commander of the 11th Air Assault Brigade Lieutenant Colonel Vitaly Laskov. He’d said the exact same thing about “their final leap” a month ago, at the first of these services.

Colonel Igor Sokol, acting Commander of the 36th Army, spoke before Laskov. Almost all of the military officials who speak at these rallies have “acting” in front of their titles.

Elena Trifonova

About ten police officers stood in the audience. They were watching to make sure that no one was photographing or filming the proceedings.

journalists.

“Who are you?”

“The press.”

“There is no photography allowed here. You need special permission from the organizers.”

Larisa Stepanova, the deputy head of public affairs for Ulan-Ude’s Sovetsky District, is the lead organizer. She was engrossed in a lively conversation with the Mayor.

“No, you can’t take any photos and no, I will not comment on anything,” she replied to a question about how often these funerals are being held. Suddenly, Stepanova was overcome and her eyes filled with tears. “Do you know how many of these funerals I’ve organized already? I have a son over there, in Ukraine.”

Stepanova’s profile page on Odnoklassniki [a Russian social network] has a photo of the administration employees lined up in the shape of the letter “Z.” Her latest post was a portrait of Putin with Stepanova’s caption, “...I pray for my President, I pray for each soldier of our Great Nation, I pray for the brave and honorable Chechens who have not betrayed our country, and I mourn the dead...”

Ulan-Ude Mayor Shutenkov and Vice Speaker of the National Khural Dorzhiyev refused to comment for this piece.

The relatives of the four dead soldiers would not talk to journalists.

The police asked us to leave the auditorium. They had a car outside where they took down the journalists’ personal information.

“If you try to take any photos or film any of this again, you’re coming to the precinct.”

A man in a filthy jacket staggered out of a lopsided, wooden barrack next to the archery range. He smelled hungover.

“Do they often have funerals at the archery range?” I asked him.

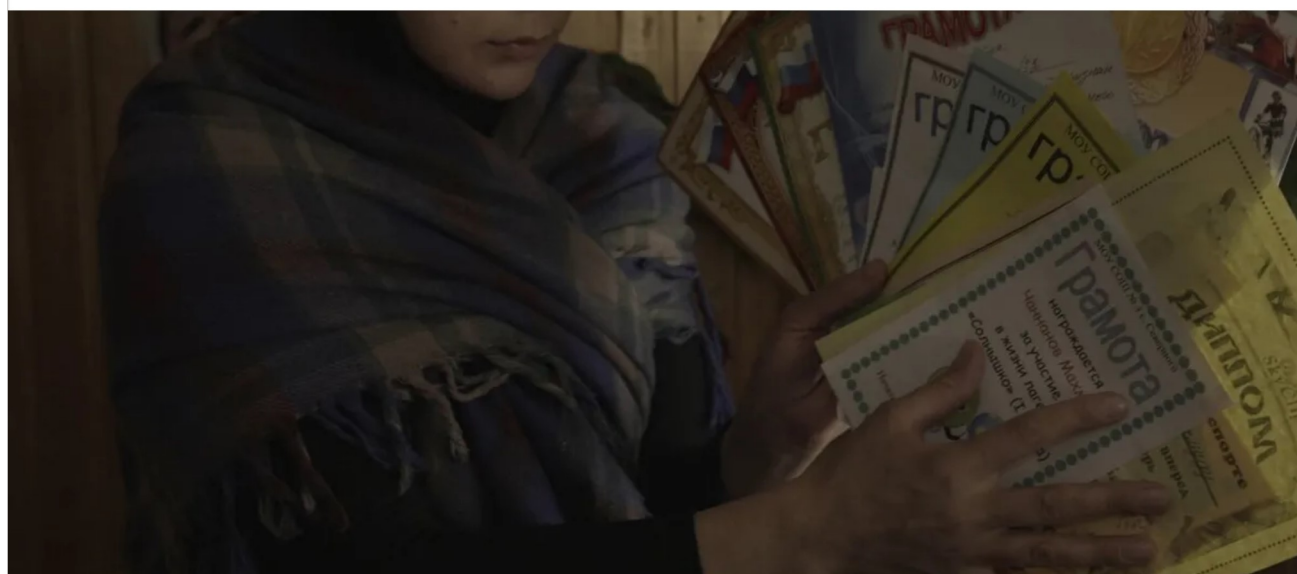
“Hey there, don’t record me!” he waved his hands in front of his face, as though he was chasing a journalist off. “I can smell you traitors a mile away. I used to work undercover myself.”

At the beginning of March, when the first coffins arrived in Buryatia, the head of the republic, Alexey Tsydenov, had come to a handful of these funerals himself. He’d been accompanied by news cameras and journalists. The first obituaries appeared on the front pages of regional newspapers. Once the funerals became a near-daily occurrence, Tsydenov stopped coming

Buryatia. All of them had either done military service or been born in the republic; their deaths were reported by their relatives, the regional authorities, or People of the Baikal journalists who had been at their funerals.

Buryatia has the second highest war casualty rate among all of Russia's regions. Dagestan is in first place. According to data [compiled](#) by Mediazona, when there were 125 dead from Dagestan, Buryatia reported 85. There are hardly any casualties among Moscow or St. Petersburg residents, even though they make up 12 percent of the Russian population.

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'Who caused this unemployment — Nazis or our government?' The Dagestani soldiers dying in Putin's war

a month ago

The Defense Ministry has twice issued statements about the number of Russian losses since the beginning of the "special operation." Last time, they [claimed](#) there were 1,351 dead in total. Meanwhile, Mediazona [reported](#) 1,744, deaths that were confirmed by regional authorities. The U.S. State Department [estimated](#) the number of Russian casualties at 10,000 as of the end of March, without revealing how they arrived at that number.

Since March, the names of the dead have only been published in Buryatia's local newspapers or on social media. Then their obituaries are reprinted in the regional

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on their VKontakte page. His funeral took place in the village of Ilyinka, where Dulinsky lived.

Sometimes the obituaries are simply written by friends or relatives. There was no official notice regarding the deaths of Eduard Zhidyayev or Anton Khatkheyev, whose funerals were held at the archery range during the last week of March. The VKontakte page "I'm from Ulan-Ude" posted about Vladislav Kokorin's death a month after his funeral.

There is no information regarding the number of war casualties on the regional administration's website. Evgeny Fuzhenko, the Irkutsk region's Military Commissar, said that he would not name the number of casualties because "it's not very significant." The Krasnoyarsk region's Military Commissioner Andrei Lysenko said that it's "inappropriate and indecent to request this kind of statistics." No one in Buryatia has been publicly asked about the republic's total number of military casualties.

"They tell us that we just shouldn't write about that," said a journalist from a publication controlled by the regional administration. She asked not to be named. "And if we try writing something about them, we have to literally walk through fire to do it."

A journalist from another publication attempted to get in touch with the relatives of a fallen soldier. The relatives asked army officials for permission to talk to him. That very evening, the editor in chief of the publication called the journalist into his office and told him that he had gotten a call from the administration; the editor then explained that the journalist shouldn't be talking to the relatives of the deceased. "There's an unspoken ban on this subject," the other journalist we talked to added.

Elena Trifonova

Almost all soldiers' relatives refused to talk about the deceased.

Zhambo Khotsayev, a doctor at a traditional Eastern medicine clinic in Ulan-Ude, buried his nephew Zorigto Khotsayev on March 28. He explained that military officials had warned everyone ahead of time not to take any photos at the funeral, not to tell anyone anything, and not to answer phone calls from unfamiliar numbers. "Ukrainian hackers will steal your data and make fakes. That's what the soldiers told us," Khotsayev said.

How the "Ukrainian hackers" would use the "data," Khotsayev didn't know. A few days ago, his wife received a Viber message from an unfamiliar number wishing her condolences on the death of Zorigto. Zhambo and his wife didn't like that. Their relatives have been getting cursed out regularly from Ukrainian phone numbers. Ukrainians leave these kinds of messages under practically every social media post about soldiers' deaths.

On April 19, the Defense Ministry officially proposed limiting access to the information of fallen soldiers' relatives. Videos with soldiers who return from tours of duty in Ukraine have soldiers' and relatives' faces blurred out.

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transported from the archery range to the Southern Cemetery on the outskirts of Ulan-Ude. The funeral processions stretched a kilometer behind the hearses. When the soldiers removed the coffins from the black vans labeled “Ritual Service,” and raised them up on their shoulders, a brass band began to play.

Women were carrying wreaths behind each of the coffins. Buryatian women don't go to the cemetery; they are traditionally forbidden from attending burials. But there were so many wreaths — from the government, from relatives, from the Defense Ministry. They were carried by associates from the Mayor's Office.

“Would you mind grabbing a wreath?” one of them asked a People of the Baikal journalist.

“But we're not relatives.”

“Neither am I. It doesn't matter,” the woman said, handing over a wreath for Vladislav Kokorin.

Fallen soldiers are buried either here, at the Southern Cemetery, or in the towns and villages where they are from. This is up to their relatives. The Defense Ministry has its own lot at the edge of the cemetery. Since the end of February, it has gained 27 graves. Fifteen fresh ones stood empty while the groundkeepers were digging more.

“We were told to get two new rows ready by today or tomorrow. Another shipment of them is supposed to come in,” said Dmitry, a gravedigger. There were six graves left to dig to complete the two rows. “I wouldn't say they're burying a lot more people than usual,” Dmitry added. “Maybe two or three soldiers a day. During the height of the pandemic, it was, like, 15 people a day. Now that was busy.”

Meanwhile, the lamas were building small fires near the graves of the Buryats with logs they'd brought with them. Unwrapped candy and cookies are thrown into these fires to feed the spirits so they will protect the dead in the sky.

The majority of Buryats are Buddhist. After the funerals, they don't return to the cemetery. They don't put tombstones up on their graves and they don't erect gates around them like the Russians do. They tightly pack the dirt over their graves and then place a *soyombo* at their feet — tall stakes with a white or blue cloth tied to the top. The sooner the grave becomes level with the earth and becomes overgrown with grass and trees, and the *soyombo* rots and falls over, the better it is for the soul of the dead. In 49 days, the soul must be reborn in a new body.

The graves in the Defense Ministry's lot are all identical, with tombstones made of black granite. The tombstones bear engraved portraits of the dead, and the dates of their births and deaths. There are no gates or benches next to the graves. Each one has fake flowers and wreaths laid next to it. The only difference between the burials of the

in identical frames stand right on the graves.

When the graves are covered over, Colonel Sokol hands the relatives of the departed medals for Courage, which the soldiers are all awarded posthumously. Soldiers give final salutes over the graves.

The question of why so many Buryats are dying is being discussed in every kitchen in the republic. Sometimes, dissatisfaction is expressed publicly.

At the end of March, Buryatia's Head Alexey Tsydenov gathered cultural leaders at the Buryatia Opera and Ballet Theater and read them a lecture about the "special operation." After the lecture, the the Buryatia Drama Theater's spokesperson, Batodalai Bagdayev asked the regional head, "You know Ceremonial Guard No.1 on Red Square? Have you ever seen anyone with 'slanted eyes' in it? The selection process for that brigade is obvious: they only want tall, blue-eyed, Slavic men. Our kind — bow-legged, short, high-cheekboned — aren't wanted around there. But when it comes time for someone to die, we are the ones that they send."

"Bastard!" someone shouted out from the audience. Tsydenov asked for Bagdayev's microphone to be cut and the artistic director of the Buryatia Opera and Ballet Theater, Vladimir Rylov, took the floor next. "I would like to respond to that bastard who has dared to insult the Buryat people in front of me, in my theater. We are all Putinist Buryats! We will not let our country be destroyed. If we start criticizing the government for the fact that yes, there are casualties, yes, there are wounded, yes, there are victims, we will betray those victims and wounded. It will mean they have died for nothing. Victory only!"

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Feeling Around for Something Human Why do Russians support the war against Ukraine? Shura Burtin investigates.

5 days ago

In April, Ulan-Ude's Soviets' Square was decorated with a banner reading "Buryatia for Truth" — with the letters "V" and "Z" in the Russian words replaced with the Latin letters used in pro-war propaganda. The message was written in yellow letters on a blue background with the "Z" in a St. George ribbon pattern and the "V" painted in the colors of the Russian flag. The letters stretched out across the entire length of the facade of the civic registrars' office. The banner faced a 23-foot tall sculpture of Lenin's head — the largest one in the world.

The base of the bust was also decorated with a banner striped like the Russian flag, with a letter "Z" on it. A week later, someone had cut the lower part of the banner off with a knife. This occurred in the middle of the night, but by the morning, authorities had already put up a fresh one — with the letter "V." They explained that that's what they had wanted to do all along: the wives of the Buryat soldiers had been begging Tsydenov to put up a "V" banner since that was the letter on the vehicles in which their husbands fought.

But the issue is not that it is Buryats in particular fighting. Of Buryatia's 102 casualties [recorded by People of the Baikal as of April 26], 55 are ethnic Russians. Buryats actually only make up 30 percent of the local population.

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“Why do you think so many soldiers from Buryatia have been killed?” asked Ekaterina, the sister of Mikhail Garmayev, who was killed in battle. “There are absolutely no jobs here. That’s why the boys have to sign up to fight.” Many relatives said the same thing. Mikhail Garmayev had been interested in the theater when he was young, he drew. After he did his army service, he and his brother got jobs at a company that installed security systems. He made 15–20,000 [\$220–290] rubles a month. After working like that for almost two years, he enlisted as a contract soldier.

Elena Trifonova

His brother Alexander still works at that same company. Now he makes “okay money, 30-35,000 [rubles] a month” [\$440–510]. It’s shift work, so he almost never comes home.

Amgalan Tudupov graduated from the athletics department of Buryatia State University. He got a job as a gym teacher. “He’d take his kids everywhere — skiing, basketball. He loved his job,” his mother Tsyrema Tudupova said. But his salary at the school was 7,000 rubles [\$100] a month. After his first child was born, he needed more money. He “held out for a year then he joined the army.” He immediately started making 40–50,000 [\$590–730] a month. “He was so happy, so satisfied with himself

Amgalan liked the army although he said it was “difficult work.” He’d come home late and then get up early, at 3 or 4 in the morning and go back to work. “I’d ask him, ‘Maybe you should quit?’” Tyrema said. “But he’d respond, ‘And how would I feed my kids?’”

The soldiers who ended up in Ukraine have anonymously said that they are making 250 thousand rubles a month [\$3660 USD].

In 2020, Buryatia ranked 81st among Russian regions in terms of quality of life. The neighboring Irkutsk Republic ranked 55th. According to Buryatia’s Statistics Service, 20 percent of residents had incomes below the poverty line in 2020 — up from 17.5 percent in 2013. In 2019, Ulan-Ude took last place in terms of quality of life among 78 cities with populations over 250,000.

According to public data, there are 15 military units in Buryatia. The total number of contract soldiers is unknown. In 2015, their numbers were supposed to be doubled. The authorities planned to enlist 26,000 people in the Eastern Military District. In 2020, 1,300 more people signed contracts with the army, and another 600 people enlisted in 2021.

The same day as the funeral at the Southern Cemetery, March 28, Zorigto Khotsayev was being buried in the village of Alla. His family had moved to Ulan-Ude in 2014, but his relatives had decided to bury Zorigto in his native village. “The mountains are beautiful, the water is clean. That’s where the soil that ties him to the earth lies,” said his uncle, Zhambo Khotsayev.

Zorigto was the eldest of three children. He’d studied programming at the technical academy, did his army service, then signed up as a contractor. He’d been a gunner in the 11th Assault Brigade. He’d already fought in Syria. He left behind his parents, his brother, and a little sister, who is in second grade.

He died February 25 and was buried March 28. “We were the first ones called in for identification,” Zhambo Khotsayev said. “There were five city boys in the morgue, and ten country boys. Ours was the most badly burned. We ended up having to do genetic tests, that’s why it took so long to get him buried.”

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'The trenches mean we're being protected' How residents of Russia's Belgorod region are learning to live with shelling. Meduza and 7×7 report.

10 days ago

When relatives were invited to speak at the cemetery, Zhambo thanked the army officials. "I said, 'Nephew, you have not been left behind. You died, but they found you and brought you home. Flew you 12 hours back to Ulan-Ude. Then drove you 450 kilometers [280 miles] to Alla on an overnight bus ride. *No man left behind* aren't just empty words,'" Zhambo said, summarizing his eulogy.

According to Zhambo, a lot of Alla's boys are fighting in Ukraine right now. Some families have two sons there at the same time. Many people wept at Zorigto's wake, thinking about their own sons. After Zhambo spoke, people stopped crying. An army official thanked him for that.

When Zorigto's relatives were notified that he'd died, they went to the Lamist temple to see the lama, who told them that according what he foresaw in the Buddhist books, in his next life, Zorigto would be born as a girl in a rich family, in a warm country by the sea.

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Elena Trifonova

“They believe that you will turn into whatever you are thinking about right before you die,” Zhambo said. “He must have been freezing, that’s why he’s going to be born in a warm country. There was no water, he wanted to drink, so it will be by the sea. He was thinking about his family, about supporting them, so he’ll be born in a rich family. And he was thinking about his little sister, so he will be a girl. That girl will graduate from a good university and will come here to Alla once she is around his age, and she will fight for peace across the world.”

“Buddhism prohibits killing. But Buryatia’s Buddhist soldiers do kill. Can they expect to be reincarnated into better lives?” I asked Zhambo. At the end of April, the lamas of Russia’s traditional Sangkha performed a service for soldiers at a field camp in Ukraine.

Zhambo didn’t say anything for a long time. Then he said, “Who told you that they were Buddhists?”

“They’re not?”

“They’re not.”

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that way so that they wouldn't accidentally harm the ground that they walked on, the grass, or a single insect.

“When you say you're ‘against the war’ — that's no good, that's a negation,” Zhambo continued. “It's better to say you're ‘for peace.’ And we're all for peace. I am not saying this to justify the war. But it's like it was back in '41. It's the same thing now — that same fascism. I don't have all the information. But I do know that.”

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