

'War Has a Cost': The Journalists Tallying Russia's Dead Soldiers

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Alexander Koryakov / Kommersant

The lists of Russia's war dead may be hundreds and thousands of names long but some casualties stand out to the journalists who painstakingly compile them.

Olga Ivshina, a senior reporter at the BBC Russian Service, can instantly recall Mikhail Shuvalov, a retired power plant worker who volunteered to fight in Ukraine at the age of 71. David Frenkel, a data reporter for the independent Russian news outlet Mediazona, remembers Alexander Zhmur, a 19-year-old paratrooper who met the grim fate foreshadowed by his last name, Russian slang for "corpse."

For Elena Trifonova, co-founder and editor of Siberian news website Lyudi Baikala, tallying the local men killed early in the conflict swiftly became a blur. Nearly every soldier from Russia's Far Eastern regions of Irkutsk and Buryatia had the same obituary: he graduated high school, joined the army and died in Ukraine.

With the Russian government seldom disclosing the death toll from its war in Ukraine, independent journalists have spent the past year identifying, verifying and counting the fallen themselves. The endeavor has become so mammoth that Mediazona, one of the news

outlets behind the initiative, issued a call earlier this month for more volunteers.

“It’s not happy work, but somebody has to do it. We want to show the public that even for patriotic Russia, for pro-Putin Russia, war has a cost and that cost is Russian soldiers,” Frenkel said.

A nationwide database jointly maintained by Mediazona and the BBC’s Russian service has confirmed over 15,000 fatalities since launching last spring, though Frenkel estimates the true number to be at least twice as large.

Lyudi Baikala has verified nearly 750 deaths from the area of Siberia it covers, most of them from the heavily mobilized republic of Buryatia. Pskovskaya Guberniya, a local newspaper in Russia’s western Pskov region, has tallied the local death count to number 142.

The Russian Defense Ministry last released an official death toll — 5,937 troops — in September. Western officials believe at least 200,000 Russians have been killed or wounded in Ukraine in the past year.

Svetlana Avanesova, an editor at Pskovskaya Guberniya, said the publication’s small staff tries to monitor deaths every day, combing through increasingly rare announcements by the regional governor and social media posts from grieving relatives.

In some cases, reporters have discovered or confirmed casualties through fundraisers for surviving family members and the renaming of local streets to honor fallen soldiers, Avanesova said.

The newspaper initially set out to gauge “the scale of the lies” told by the authorities as they sought to minimize the death count, she said, but obtaining information has become increasingly difficult.

“We are doing this for history, for us to understand and our readers to understand the toll,” Avanesova said. “We don’t know what kind of history Russia will write ... but no one else in the Pskov region is doing this or writing about it.”

Ivshina also kept Russia’s historical obfuscation of war fatalities in mind when she began tracking casualties for the BBC Russian service in March.



A wooden coffin is placed into a hearse. Roman Yarovitsyn / AP / TASS

There is still no definitive count of exactly how many perished in World War II, the Soviet-Afghan War, or Russia's military campaigns in Chechnya, she said. Government-reported losses in the First Chechen War, for example, were less than half the figure calculated by human rights groups, she said.

“For this war, we can at least have a figure that's not an estimate, that's 100% verified,” Ivshina said.

Russia's efforts to downplay its human losses in Ukraine have grown more pronounced as the fighting drags into its second year, Ivshina said.

Deaths that were once announced by regional governors and state news agencies are now left largely to local media outlets and low-level village officials, schools, community organizations, and even libraries, she said.

Ivshina spends a lot of time sifting through information gleaned from about 70 cemeteries across the country. Grave sites typically show that for every publicly named soldier buried in Russia, another is laid to rest quietly, their name absent from any open sources, she said.

During the first six months of the war, headstones would display a photo of the soldier in uniform but that practice has stopped, Ivshina said.

Documenting losses has also revealed other trends. For example, the high rate of officers killed at the start of Russia's full-scale invasion meant there were insufficient resources to properly train new recruits — fueling higher casualties later in the war.

Mediazona does not publish the names of troops killed in Ukraine but Russians are able to search for their loved ones through a Telegram bot created by volunteers, said Frenkel.

Anti-war volunteers also work inside Russia, roaming cemeteries to take photos of fresh graves. Their names are kept hidden, from each other and the outlet's staff, due to the legal dangers inherent for anyone gathering data about the Russian military, he said.

Frenkel, the technical lead for the project, creates visualizations from their contributions and is trying to find ways to automate the process of finding and verifying deaths.

“We understand that it's not possible to manually continue this work for years,” Frenkel said.

“We are not going to stop. But rationally, I understand that at some point, probably even if the war is not ended, it might just be extremely hard for team members to keep working on the same thing.”

Many of the project's volunteers are upset by the work, he said. Frenkel also finds his role mentally taxing — if only to a point.

“It's sad to scroll through a lot of dead faces but it's much more depressing to read about Bucha, for example, or about the people who died in Mariupol,” he said. “It's incomparable to the atrocities committed by Russian troops in Ukraine.”

One journalist manually updates the list maintained by Lyudi Baikala, according to editor Trifonova. For her too, it's traumatic, she said.

“Morally, it's very difficult,” Trifonova said. “You cannot get used to this.”

The list has been growing fast in recent months, with the publication's staff confirming about 40 deaths per week compared to around 20 at the beginning of the war.

The numbers seem to rise and fall in tandem with Russian offensives, Trifonova said, though the fatalities usually trickle in months later because it takes time for bodies to be repatriated.

The “enormous” toll the war has taken locally — at least 544 men from Buryatia and 203 from the Irkutsk region — was impossible to imagine when journalists began covering local funerals and compiling a record in April, Trifonova said.

The publication doesn't want the authorities to be able to say “we don't have large losses,” she said.

Lyudi Baikala has pledged to continue tracking deaths no matter how long the war lasts or how hard and time-consuming the work becomes, Trifonova said, adding that she hoped to eventually break through the state's powerful propaganda which has convinced so many

Russians of the war's legitimacy.

"Nobody wants the war but many believe this war was necessary," Tirfonova said.

"Well let them look at the lists of the dead and think about how necessary it was."