

What Happens When Russian And Ukrainian Soldiers Come Home?



*John P. Ruehl -
Source:
Independent
Media Institute*

04-09-2025 ~ Russian and Ukrainian soldiers will eventually largely lay down their arms, but as the Soviet Afghanistan War shows, returning from the frontlines causes its own issues.

Two years into his prison term for a 2020 murder, Ivan Rossomakhin was recruited into a Russian private military company (PMC) in exchange for freedom. He returned home from Ukraine [in 2023](#) and, within days, killed an 85-year-old woman in a nearby town. One week after beginning his new sentence in August 2024, he was [redrafted](#) and sent back to the front.

His crime marks one of many committed by convicts [pardoned](#) to serve in the army and Russian troops returning home. “A survey of Russian court records by the independent media outlet Verstka [found](#) that at least 190 criminal cases were initiated against pardoned Wagner recruits in 2023,” stated an April 2024 New York Times article.

Growing concerns point to a potentially worse repeat of the “[Afghan syndrome](#)” experienced by Soviet veterans of the 1979-1989 war in Afghanistan. Many of the [roughly 642,000](#) Soviet soldiers who served returned as outcasts to a society eager to forget an unpopular war. Many turned to addiction and alcoholism, alongside [organized crime](#), amplified further by the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991. Additionally, Chechen veterans of the Afghan War [used their combat](#)

[experience](#) to fiercely resist Russia in the first Chechen war (1994-1996).

The war in Ukraine is producing an even larger and more battle-hardened generation of veterans. Russian casualties [surpassed 15,000](#) during almost five months of the war, exceeding a decade of [Soviet losses](#) in Afghanistan. A January 2025 New York Times [article](#) estimates that around 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers were killed by December 2024, while 150,000 Russian soldiers lost their lives until November of that year. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands have been wounded, and millions have been cycled through the front lines. Most survivors will have some form of PTSD, further desensitized by the glorification of brutal combat and torture footage on [social media](#).

Ukrainian soldiers were “experiencing intense symptoms of psychological stress,” [according](#) to a 2023 Washington Post article. Meanwhile, in 2024, Deutsche Welle reported that “According to the Russian Health Ministry, 11,000 Russian military personnel who had taken part in the war against Ukraine, as well as their family members, sought psychological help within a six-month period in 2023.”

Reintegrating these men into society will be an uphill battle for the Russian and Ukrainian governments, with lingering wariness from past failures. In [December 2022](#), Russian Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko vowed to prevent a repeat of the Afghan syndrome and reintegrate veterans back into civilian life. As the war grinds on, however, its consequences are already unfolding. Both Moscow and Kyiv are managing ongoing troop rotations while preparing for the eventual mass return of soldiers—and exploring how to use them for political and military ends.

Crime and Unrest

For Soviet Afghan veterans, dismissive rhetoric about the war and limited support upon their return created deep resentment. Before coming to power in 1985, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev [called the war a mistake](#), and it took [until 1994](#) for Russian Afghan veterans to receive the same status as World War II veterans. Only [in 2010](#) did Russia designate the end of the conflict as a state holiday.

The Kremlin has taken a different approach with Ukraine war veterans, venerating them as the nation’s “[new elite](#)” in a do-or-die struggle against the West. Alongside extensive media praise, soldiers [have been fast-tracked](#) to important government and business roles. Despite strained social services, the

government has [provided benefits](#) to returned and fallen servicemen's families to prevent unrest.

The Kremlin's decision to use prison labor to meet troop numbers—an approach it avoided during the Afghan War—has already caused a serious fallout. By 2023, [more than 100,000 prisoners](#) had been recruited, many joining Wagner, Russia's most notorious private military company. Though Wagner was later absorbed and reorganized after its armed [rebellion](#) against the Russian military later that year, its ex-convict soldiers remain a source of public outrage, [committing some of the most serious](#) violent offenses upon their return and contributing to a [general rise in crime](#). “Numerous shootouts have occurred in Moscow, and the army is increasingly merging with organized crime,” stated a 2024 report in the Eurasia Daily Monitor.

While the issue is drawing increasing public attention, Russia's internal security services, including the National Guard (Rosgvardiya), are [already stretched thin](#), tasked with patrolling occupied Ukrainian territories while reinforcing front-line units. Their burden could grow heavier if returning Chechen soldiers, whom Moscow has [deployed extensively in Ukraine](#), choose to revisit their independence ambitions. Other nationalist and extremist movements, aided by hardened soldiers, risk resurfacing.

Russia's [reliance on criminal networks](#) for logistical and financial support in its war has only emboldened these groups. A [2024 shootout](#) just blocks from the Kremlin in 2024, linked to “corporate violence,” evoked the chaos of the 1990s. “Russia's economy, strained by sanctions and the ongoing war, is creating an atmosphere where business elites are increasingly willing to resort to drastic measures for survival. In the 1990s, oligarchs, criminal gangs, and corrupt officials thrived in an environment where the legal system was powerless,” stated the Moscow Times.

With few well-paying job prospects, returning soldiers may be tempted to join existing groups or create their own, destabilizing Russia's criminal networks that are [deeply integrated into Putin's power structure](#).

Ukraine faces similar challenges. Though Kyiv was slower and more restrained in deploying [prisoner battalions](#), reintegrating them into society will not be easy. Authorities in the country are [working to prevent](#) powerful domestic criminal

organizations from absorbing returning soldiers while contending with the threat of armed resistance in Russian-leaning regions.

The Ukrainian government has been mindful in honoring its soldiers but has witnessed a surge in attacks on recruitment offices, including [four attacks in five days](#) in February 2025. While Russia's recruitment efforts also faced some backlash, Russia has avoided large-scale conscription ([despite some coercion](#)). In contrast, Ukraine has relied heavily on mandatory enlistment, driving [increasing antagonism](#) toward recruitment measures—tensions that will continue building and could spread after the war.

Private Military Companies

The war is already providing a massive boost to a burgeoning global private military industry, which is likely to expand after the conflict's conclusion. Private military company recruits have long participated in a multinational market—some Russian Afghan veterans claim they were [contracted to serve](#) with American forces in Afghanistan after 2001. However, the sheer number of Russian and Ukrainian veterans with combat experience could revolutionize the industry, much like the [collapse of the Soviet Union](#) and resulting surplus of military personnel did.

Before 2015, Russian PMCs [were limited](#) to Ukraine, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo but have since expanded to around 30 countries. Unlike the mass-scale, technology-driven Ukrainian conflict, smaller PMCs can operate effectively in other regions, and their deployment has already contributed to the French military's withdrawal from Africa [in recent years](#).

Ukraine's private military sector [is similarly growing](#) and, in the future, may find favor with European countries that backed Kyiv during the war. Given Europe's [ongoing struggle](#) to meet military recruitment needs, it is likely that Ukrainian veterans may be used to address this issue.

In Ukraine and Russia, demobilized men have often been employed by oligarchs for their own purposes, a trend that [emerged in the 1990s](#). This issue resurfaced [in 2015](#) when Ukrainian billionaire Igor Kolomoisky used PMCs to combat Russian-backed separatists, as well to protect his own financial interests, culminating in an armed standoff at a state oil company. The incident showed how privatized military power can easily slip beyond government control—something

Russia later experienced with [Wagner's rebellion](#) in 2023.

Reintegration

After the instability caused by Soviet Afghan veterans throughout the 1990s, Russian authorities began taking more concrete steps to integrate them, rehabilitate their image, and harness their potential. [In 1999](#), the Russian Alliance of Veterans of Afghanistan helped create what would become the Putin-backed United Russia party (though he is now independent). Afghan and Chechen war veterans also joined OMON, Russia's special police force used to suppress protests, while other paramilitary veteran groups aided in Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 when military force was limited.

More recently, Afghan veteran organizations have been [integral](#) to supporting the Kremlin's war in Ukraine by providing volunteers ([with Ukraine pooling their Afghan veterans](#)) and drumming up support. The [evolution](#) of the movement from disillusioned anti-war veterans into some of the Ukraine war's strongest backers shows the effectiveness of its refurbishment and the Kremlin's recognition of their value.

It is no surprise, then, that the Kremlin has been actively [preventing the formation](#) of independent veteran organizations from the current war in Ukraine. This action of centralizing the veterans into formal initiatives ensures that no group can challenge the government authority, and they can be organized and used during future conflicts.

The attitudes of returning servicemen on both sides will also be shaped by the war's outcome. Conflicts viewed as futile, with waning public approval—such as the U.S. conflicts in [Iraq and Afghanistan](#) or the Soviet war in Afghanistan—leave a lasting psychological toll on veterans, raising the potential for suicide and social unrest. Beyond the staggering civilian and combatant casualties, these wars bred resentment among returning soldiers, many of whom struggled with the sense that their service was part of failed wars of aggression.

The framing of victory by political leaders, the media, and society is, therefore, essential. Soldiers who believe they fought in a just and successful war are more likely to reintegrate with a sense of purpose, compared to a losing side feeling abandoned and embittered. The defeated will likely harbor greater animosity toward its government, have grievances over inadequate support, and face a

heightened risk of social instability—making both sides inclined to claim victory.

It may be in the best interest of both Moscow and Kyiv to avoid declaring an end to the war and pursuing demobilization, lest they be seen as admitting defeat and triggering the return of restless and unemployed soldiers. With the [Russian](#) and [Ukrainian](#) economies now heavily oriented toward war, a rapid end would trigger economic shocks.

An inconclusive war that gradually winds down, however, may allow veterans to slowly reintegrate into society, as governments praise their service to generate goodwill. Others will be encouraged by Moscow and Kyiv to seek outlets in other conflicts, exporting combat-ready men rather than bringing them home.

By John P. Ruehl

Author Bio: John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C., and a world affairs correspondent for the [Independent Media Institute](#). He is a contributor to several foreign affairs publications, and his book, [Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas](#), was published in December 2022.

Credit Line: This article was produced by [Economy for All](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.