

A catastrophe for one—salvation for others

A wave of desertions in Ukraine

Ukrainian journalists
7 October 2024

This report on the growing wave of desertions in Ukraine was submitted to the WSWs from journalists of Assembly.org.ua. It documents crumbling front lines. While individual desertions are not a substitute for the development of a politically conscious movement by the working class, they indicate growing anti-war opposition among broad masses of Ukrainians who are being used as cannon fodder in the imperialist proxy war against Russia. The journalists, who have been forced into the underground by the dictatorial Zelensky regime, ask for donations to support their work at this link.

The beginning of autumn in Ukraine was marked by a worsening situation on the front lines. With every day, the defenses in the Donetsk region are crumbling further. In the Kharkov region, Russian troops are approaching the Oskol River. In the direction of Kursk, they have also regained control of a number of settlements, although the Ukrainian army is still attacking in some places. The euphoria of victory has once again given way to frustration, and where there are defeats, there is increased pressure on internal “enemies of the people.” It is not yet clear who will be appointed as the next scapegoat. We can only note that the country’s information space turned out to be filled with the topic of the army’s decay from within.

On September 11, a video statement by two-time Kharkov mayoral candidate Denis Yaroslavsky, who currently heads one of the reconnaissance units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, was widely reported and commented on in the mass media and social networks:

If I tell you now the number of SZCh [Ukrainian abbreviation for the unauthorized leaving of a military unit, in Russian—SOCh] as of today, all the big Russian social media accounts will turn on us and shout “look how many deserters they have.” They don’t show theirs, we can’t show ours either. But I call this situation very deplorable. Now we already have a disease. I will not say that this is already the fourth stage, as in oncology, but it’s definitely the second, transitioning to the third. And progressing. From the very beginning, we did not have SZCh, because, for example, I served in a volunteer battalion for the first three months, we didn’t receive a salary, nothing, and there were tens of thousands of people like me. Because there was motivation. Motivation to win. Now the war has entered such a stage when only those who don’t want to [fight] is drafted to the battlefield. The motivated people have either died or grown tired [of the war].

Two days earlier, on September 9, Kiev journalist Volodymyr Boiko, who serves in the 101st brigade of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, stated even more sharply about this law on his Facebook page:

... I said and say that the number of deserters has already exceeded 150 thousand persons and is approaching 200 thousand. With the current dynamics, it’s possible to predict 200 thousand deserters by December 2024. I also want to emphasize that the actual decriminalization of desertion will have catastrophic consequences for the front in the near future. ... Today, crimes against the established order of military service are not investigated at all, deserters are not wanted—this is what led to the fact that the problem accumulated for 2.5 years and now the situation has reached a dead end. It’s impossible to bring such a large number of deserters to justice, and it’s impossible to find them. That’s why the head of state Andrii Yermak (may His name be sanctified!) decided that people should be captured on the streets and sent to the front instead of deserters. But this doesn’t help—after entering the military units, the mobilized simply return home. If anyone returns, it will only be a few people. First of all, it’s technically impossible—after registration of criminal proceedings, the deserter is excluded from the personnel lists and he can re-enter the service only through the TCR [territorial center for recruitment, i.e., enlistment office], through re-mobilization. Secondly, that wasn’t why the deserter left the unit and returned home. Another thing is that mass desertion has now begun, as the people have seen that it’s possible to “get on skis” and there will be nothing for it.

A similar figure of more than 100,000 people who escaped from their units was cited on September 26 by Kharkov human rights advocate and military lawyer Roman Likhachyov. From his words, some of these cases involve 20 to 30 persons. On October 3, the same right-wing blogger Boiko mentioned the story when analyzing the reasons for the fall of Ugledar (Ukrainian spelling: Vuhledar) in the south of Donbass:

What has been happening in Vuhledar over the past few days, in general, is called a local collapse of the front. The chaotic retreat of the remnants of the 72nd Separate Mechanized Brigade, which still has not received an order to withdraw, and then leaving the town within three days after months of successful defense, is something I have warned about many times since January 2024. It will only get worse. [...] Here, for example, is information about the last, before the surrender of Vuhledar, replenishment of personnel of the 72nd brigade. 50 new recruits, mostly aged 52-56, arrived in the brigade. 30 of them were immediately sent to rear units and hospitals, as they were not fit for front-line service due to their health (because the TCR was implementing a draft plan and mobilizing the sick). Of the remaining 20, 16 servicemen deserted on the second day. Thus, out of a replenishment of 50 people, 4

were sent to the position, and after the first rotation, these four also deserted. And such a situation there is on the entire front.

On the same day, October 3, in Voznesensk of the Nikolaev/Mykolaiv region, about 100 soldiers from the 187th Battalion of the 123rd Territorial Defense Brigade of the AFU came out to protest. All of them refused to carry out the combat mission and left their unit without permission instead of supporting the 72nd Brigade. According to them, they lacked the training and weapons to take part in the fighting. “I have repeatedly appealed, even to my section, for which I was responsible. I asked to provide PKMs, machine guns. ‘We don’t have any, we can’t provide them.’ And what will then happen with the Donbass?” a platoon commander named Sergei told state TV. The day before, 33-year-old Igor Grib, commander of the 186th Battalion in this brigade, shot himself because his battalion fled from its positions near Ugledar. (This led to the final loss of the town.) Volodymyr Boiko writes that the lieutenant colonel committed suicide after the formation: When the soldiers dispersed, they heard a shot. On October 4, a farewell ceremony for the officer was held in Pervomaysk, the hometown of the jailed Trotskyist Bogdan Syrotiuk.

If this summer we wrote [in Russian; in English] that these desertions usually occurred in the form of failure to return from the hospital or vacation, now soldiers already leave and disappear directly from their positions, even if there was no shelling. An instructor of the 59th Motorized Infantry Brigade of the AFU, which is fighting near Pokrovsk, spoke about this in a Deutsche Welle report from September 11.

On September 15, one of the largest news channels in Ukraine also wrote about how the official statistics of military escapes are an understatement. A captain in the armed forces told the journalists:

... SZChs and those who refuse to serve are removed from the staff. Went out arbitrarily, was absent from the unit for more than ten days. Or refused to go to the front. Most SZChs and those who refuse to fight don’t have criminal cases opened against them, commanders don’t write reports. Since this spoils the overall statistics of the unit and calls into question the commander’s competence to lead and maintain morale. Therefore, this contingent is quietly removed from the staff. There’s another nuance. The thing is that if the sick, offenders or those who refuse to fight aren’t removed from the staff, then according to the documents the unit doesn’t need to be replenished. And it’s considered combat-ready. But in reality the unit isn’t combat-ready. Since more than half of it consists of offenders or wounded. Offenders with drunkenness or fights, or drug addicts, can be kept out of staff for years—no one needs them in combat units. They also can’t be fired, so offenders can be kept in reserve companies as cheap labor for units. They are rarely allowed home, they are kept in the rear not far from the unit. There’s no security in the reserve companies for “outstuffers.” If an “outstuffer” escapes from a reserve company—goes into repeated SZCh, then he’s first declared wanted. Then a criminal case is opened for desertion. People escape from reserve companies very often. But some of them are caught by the Military Law Enforcement Service and brought back after “re-education” at the commandant’s office.”

On September 14, Lviv military serviceman Maxim Bugel described on Facebook how the unwillingness of our neighbors in the Sumy region (also bordering with the Kursk region of Russia) to provide housing led him to thoughts about desertion:

... There was hope that after the shelling started in Sumy and many people left, eventually they would need funds to rent housing in the places they moved to. But the planets didn’t align. An ?L? announcement. There are a few houses, a few apartments, but there is a nuance—they are rented only out only to families with children, ... Prices are reduced but the requirements for settlement are not. And today I also learned that in one of the apartment buildings, in the settlement where we are now, they were meeting and deciding whether to let the military into the building. They agreed—that we are unclean and have no place in their heavenly place. In the neighboring building, they decided to let us in. There is a desire to gather my Cossacks on their square and also hold at least a referendum on the topic “do we need to defend them” and if the decision is not in their favor—turn around and go home. It is interesting to look at their faces in this case. Will there be more fear or joy that a brotherly people will come to them?

Earlier that month, a famous right-wing activist was indignant that residents of a high-rise building in Kharkov wanted to evict his volunteer warehouse in order to avoid missile arrival.

The article “In the long hot summer, Ukrainian and Russian soldiers broke records for the growth of desertions,” which was published by us on the first day of autumn, turned out to be very timely. (It is available in Russian or in English.) We received some feedback on it from both sides of the front. From discussions in local chats of Kharkov, here is the full text in the original version:

I have a small observation, several busified ones [men who had been forcibly put on buses to be drafted], who haven’t been very critical of the authorities all this time, now quite console themselves with the thought that those at the top know better. While you are “free,” your thoughts remain within the framework of the main social currents and have the opportunity to wag. As soon as you get into a collective with outlined tasks, in most cases, your thoughts are in the same tunnel as everyone else. Once someone has been busified and gets into a collective of others who had previously been busified, but are already resigned to the situation, mentally adapts to them, accepts their point of view, creating a comfort zone (swimming against the current is always uncomfortable). There he’s drawn into the topic and also begins to think that everyone else is a scoundrel and an evader, motivation appears. Until he gets into slaughter. There comes awareness and often SOCh.

... A godfather and two deceased acquaintances of mine went voluntarily from the first days [of the war], but when they came to Kharkov, we drank together, no one shouted that I’m an evader, but on the contrary, [they said] that there’s nothing to do there [at the front]. One, a volunteer too, is already abroad. He went for 2 weeks and has been there for half a year already...

...

Half of [the men living in] my yard are SZCh, [in] the Slobozhansky district. The main thing is not to get caught, otherwise no one cares. We don’t have a military prosecutor’s office anymore, the cops deal with deserters now, and they don’t give a damn about it. In the spring, an acquaintance showed up in the neighborhood. He fought in the Zaporozhye region. In May, the commander came to him and said: “We’re being transferred to Liptyy [one of the hottest places in the Kharkov region], and then you have to decide for yourself, just leave your machine gun if you decide to run away.” Well, he left his uniform and is now an

SZCh. They're getting by somehow, like everyone else.

SZCh and SOCh can also be deciphered in our languages as "Courage, Bravery, Honor"

On September 9, we received a letter from Gorlovka, which has been controlled by the far-right Russian-backed "Donetsk People's Republic" since 2014:

The saddest thing is that if you start telling people that soldiers need to desert the army and turn their weapons against those in power, people will widen their eyes and say, "Do you want 1917 to happen again? For brother against brother again, and for people to swell with hunger? It's better if we endure, otherwise it will get worse." We have photos of those wanted for escape on our streets. And the inscriptions: "Betrayed the republic, betrayed comrades, betrayed himself." I've heard the opinion that we have a lot of SOCh. But "a lot of" is a flexible concept. And their captures aren't published here.

Along with this, on September 14, a post appeared on the Telegram channel Mobilization DPR Live about Donetsk mobilized soldiers of military unit 78979 on the Kursk direction complaining about bullying by the new commander and threats to send them on crutches to storm the front.

My advice: if you want to LIVE, run (or let them run), if possible. ... No one, no human rights bodies will help YOU! I tried! I myself didn't fully recover from my injury, I was thrown into a meat grinder assault. These bodies simply dumped me after I turned to them for "help." They dumped me in a unit that wanted to destroy me. The prosecutor's office didn't bother to deal with my case. I have to save my "life" from lawlessness, arbitrariness myself, now being in the "underground"! They simply don't need crippled fighters after injuries! They destroy us—THEIR OWN—they are finishing us off! ... According to plan? According to schedule? Yes?

A reader with an anonymous profile commented below. After we privately contacted him to ask for details, he added:

It was in Donetsk. Yes, I deserted! Because I was taken away to a meat grinder, having been partially cured, while my Russian passport and mobile phone were taken away, they kept me under armed guard the whole time, insulted and threatened me, but I managed to escape. Later I contacted the prosecutor's office, the response was silence, and they simply dumped me from the prosecutor's office to a military unit, where they wanted to zero me out. ... So I'm lying low. My opinion is that no one will help you, even the prosecutor's office. All those guys with whom I was taken were also partially cured, [and then] they died.

and organized desertion has clearly increased. Nonetheless, one should not delude oneself into thinking that this is already a revolutionary situation. Both Ukrainian and Russian public opinion is currently focused on the presidential elections in the United States, with many having the misguided hope that a Trump victory could provide the basis for a quick, peaceful settlement of the war. It seems that only the failure of these expectations can open the way for mass interest in a revolutionary alternative. We are at a turning point in history.



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Compared to the summer overview for the WSW, the role of collective