

Ukraine's voiceless army: Ukrainian deserters speak out

Ukrainian journalists
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While the mass desertion of personnel from the Ukrainian Armed Forces has already become one of the largest acts of civil disobedience in the country's history since 1991, there is almost complete silence about it in the foreign media. Since the end of last year, the number of criminal cases under Article 407 (unauthorized leaving of a military unit, or SZCh) and Article 408 (desertion) of the Criminal Code of Ukraine has remained stable at approximately 17,000 per month. In the first eight months of 2025, 142,711 criminal proceedings under these articles were registered, and a total of 265,843 cases have been registered in Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion as of September 1, 2025.

To at least somewhat reduce this flow, the Ukrainian parliament on September 4 supported Bill No. 13260, which reinstates criminal liability for SZCh, in the first reading. Previously, it was possible to avoid prosecution by voluntarily returning to military service. This provision was extended several times until it expired on August 30. Now, the bill proposes removing the court's ability to apply mitigating measures. In his September interview with *Sky News*, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated that Ukraine no longer sends its military personnel for training abroad, where so many soldiers disappeared from training grounds and received protection.

The nature of this phenomenon is revealed in verified voices exclusively published by the Assembly this summer. We are quoting here testimony from the Vinnytsia region about sending former SZCh personnel to assault units to certain death:

Well, dear friends and brothers in misfortune, I've found myself in this hell for the second time.

This time, [I was grabbed while I was] not on a hike [to cross the border], but just on the street. The cops chased me, cut me off, and then [took me] to the Military Law Enforcement Service. This happened not due to good life, I went to work and got caught.

And then it was sheer hell, there's no other way to describe it.

They treated us worse than animals, smoking [was only allowed] under guard at strict times, [there were] no phones, calls, etc., I won't speak about food or lodging, though I can't say I was really hungry.

Then, one morning, representatives [of the army] arrive, they speak beautifully, and invite you to serve the fatherland,

almost everyone refuses, then a bus [comes] and off [you are sent] to the distribution center.

Barracks, guards with automatic rifles all around the perimeter, several people at a time go to the store under guard, [army] representatives again, and you refuse, but they still take you and send you to the barracks to await deployment.

Formations are held almost every two hours, and you wait with your butt clenched, waiting for your brigade to be called, hoping to stay in the barracks for another day and finally get out of this mess.

There are other guys around you, their eyes darting around, and these eyes are searching for a way out just like you, but the more you wander around the grounds, the more this hope fades...

Everyone understands perfectly well that all the brigades you've been assigned to are Airborne Assault Forces, and you likely don't have long to live. As one guy said: "Boys, you won't have basic military training, three or four days at most to get your act together and then off you go."

I don't know how to describe it in one word. I've heard so many stories about what's happening at the front, it's just awful...

I escaped, miraculously escaped! I won't tell you how, I'll just say it was incredibly brazen and stupid, but it worked out. I just realized I had no choice and had to take the risk.

I didn't make it to military unit 7020 [a reserve battalion in the Gaisyn district], I was in the village of Rakhny. You can't escape there just like that, unless you try at night. Things have changed a bit recently. Before, the guys said, you could call a taxi, go to the store and leave.

Everyone who was there was SZCh. The guy tried to make it there, but they stuck him in the 225th [Assault Regiment]. I refused everything, they literally dragged me by the hand.

What I want to say to those already in SZCh: guys, don't take unnecessary risks. You never know where you'll end up a second time and how it might end.

Peace and goodness to all. Sooner or later this will all end, I'd like it to end sooner, of course.

The fate of those fugitives who were apprehended while attempting to cross the border after escaping is particularly unfortunate. This interlocutor from Odessa was captured in the summer right on the border with the unrecognized Transnistrian Moldavian Republic, where two months later a Ukrainian border guard shot dead a civilian

refugee:

Where I was, there was a waist-high fence, then a barbed-wire fence, and beyond that a ditch. I simply jumped over the waist-high fence. The fence was made of mesh, with barbed wire at waist level and above it. I simply climbed over it, without throwing anything from above. I grabbed the top support with my hand, stepped on the barbed wire at waist level, and climbed up, then jumped off. The border guards were even surprised that the fence was undamaged. All I had to do was climb out of the ditch and be free, but the border guards spotted me and pulled me out. I ended up, very unluckily, about 50 meters from where they were on duty. I was jumping off the fence, they heard me, shouted “stop,” and I ran and fell into a ditch about five meters high and six meters wide. The result: a broken rib or a crack. I wasn’t in the hospital, so I don’t know for sure. They took me to the Military Law Enforcement Service, where I spent three days. When they took me to the investigator, I escaped and am now recovering at home for the next attempt.

One fugitive mobilized man living in Kharkov eloquently speaks about the social status of new army recruits:

It’s tough for the homeless now; the military recruitment offices are basically rounding up precisely them... I recently took a ride in a minibus myself. There were two drug addicts, two homeless people, one is just a poor man, and the other was talking to himself. Basically, as I understand it, it’s because they try to round them up in places where they’re not often seen, early in the morning, in courtyards, behind garages, and so on, and that’s how they’re gathering such a contingent... There are no longer any willing fighters; everything is hanging on by a thin thread and could collapse at any moment, although the actor [Zelensky] and his gang don’t understand that. [...] There are only a few left who have been fighting since 2022. Everyone’s looking for a way to get out of the service under any pretext — 200,000 SZCh persons. Those who are younger and have arms and legs will run away. What’s left are the poor souls and homeless people with a host of illnesses. ... They’re unmotivated; it’s just harder for a homeless person to escape, and they have nowhere to go, and they’re afraid. So they stay. The only thing they can do is drink on leave. Plus, unfortunately, homeless people are often sent to bad units, from which it’s simply harder to escape.

The following story by a warehouse worker in Kharkov about his colleague who returned to the city last year, having left the Zaporozhye front with his entire company and commander, illustrates how the dispersion and passivity of the runaway Ukrainian soldiers prevent them from realizing their revolutionary potential, despite their enormous numbers and combat experience:

They busified [forcibly drafted] him in [20]23. He was there

for about a year. We thought it was the end for him; he’s quiet and intimidated by life. He shows up—everyone’s in shock. He’s doing fine. He’s an orphan from an orphanage. Before the war, he bought a room in a communal apartment. No one’s looking for him. He doesn’t go anywhere. He doesn’t work. He has some money. He probably cashed it out. And how much does he need anyway? Just for food. He runs out to the store in the evening and sits quietly in his room. There’s always a choice. And anyway, only dogs serve; people work.

Mass desertion from the army has deep roots in Ukrainian history, dating back to the settlement of the country’s eastern regions in the 17th century. The vast steppe territories known as the Wild Fields, along with settlers from Central Russia, were colonized by Ukrainian Cossacks and peasants fleeing the oppression by Polish feudal lords, determined to obey no one but their elected atamans. For a time, they had autonomy and privileges from the Russian government. This legacy later expressed itself vividly during the social revolution of 1917-1918 following the collapse of the tsarist army. The dialectic of history partially reproduces the two previous stages of class struggle under new conditions.

However, the description of the situation in the United States by WWS is clearly applicable to the current situation in Ukraine:

The great danger is that there remains a vast gulf between the scope of these conspiracies and the level of popular awareness of what is happening. This must change. Trump’s actions do not command broad popular support. The American people as a whole do not want dictatorship or fascism. The general sentiment is one of opposition, but this must be mobilized, consciously and collectively.

As long as Ukrainian deserters remain an amorphous and silent mass, living for the moment and trusting no one but their closest friends, the millstones of death will continue to turn as more and more people are kidnapped instead of those escaped.



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